



John Ramsay was detailed by his newspaper to investigate the report that a famous painter was going publicly to expose a fellow R.A. as a painter of pornographic pictures. The assignment led him into a world of strange emotions and personalities, to an unresolved conflict between his conscience and his journalistic sense, and to be the unwitting agent of another man's death.

The background is life in Fleet Street—a world which John Ramsay both loves and hates, where good and bad motives are inextricably mixed, where personal loyalties are as prominent as rivalries, where the battle between news sense and ethics is constantly joined and not always to the latter's disadvantage. Mr. Prebble satirises this world, but never slips into caricature.

Against this background move three outstanding lifelike characters. There is Lovett, the flamboyant painter of realistic animals; Mather, the hermit-like genius, jealously watched over by the model he has used for all his most famous and controversial masterpieces; and "The Reader", the human dynamo who drives the chain of newspapers for which John Ramsay works.

Will Lovett expose his hated colleague? Will the newspaper publish the whole surprising tragi-comic story which Ramsay unearths? And will Ramsay's hatred or love for his job prevail? Will he resign or will he accept the promotion which "The Reader" dangles before him? Mr. Prebble sustains his story to the end. In his previous books, *The Edge of Darkness* and *Age Without Pity*, he displayed great gifts of characterisation. *THE MATHER STORY* reveals as well a narrative skill of high order. The result is a satirical novel of power, originality and wit. •

•THE MATHER STORY

By the same Author

WHERE' THE SEA BREAKS
THE EDGE OF DARKNESS
AGE WITHOUT PITY

The Mather Story

JOHN PREBBLE

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TO
“*Max*”
IN FRIENDSHIP

ONE



THIS was how it ended . . .

When Lionel Mather, O.M., R.A., was dead he was buried in the Kentish village that had been his birthplace fifty-three years before. This means, I suppose, that there will be a "Mather Country" now, a tranquil weald which managed to exist independently of his tormented soul will soon be regarded as a product of it. His garden of slender lupins, distorted out of recognition to form the background of his *Gethsemane*, will become the ultimate possession of the National Trust, his tithe-barn a latter-day Flatford Mill. Marion Margherita Lucas will not open the door at which I once knocked; in her place will be an ex-serviceman with the Queen's cipher on his lapels and a roll of tickets in his hand.

If such a respectable distinction is conferred upon Mather's home the vicar will be pleased. He is one of those good men who encourage the sentimental fictions that cloy our remembrance of great men. At intervals perhaps, he will write to *The Times* asking aid for the preservation of those grotesque Stations of the Cross which Mather painted on the walls of the village church.

No doubt I shall be foolish enough to answer his appeal.

Mather's funeral was a distinguished ceremony. Three prelates in rusty gaiters came to sanction his undisputed passage to the Divinity his paintings had long worshipped. Some men and women were present simply

because their reputations demanded attendance. My profession writes often of fashionable weddings, but there are fashionable funerals too, and Mather's was one, although I would not have expected it to be so. It occurred to me at the time that it had something of the character of a Private View. Those who came exhibited the same curious interest in each other and the same indifference to the artist who had brought them there. Some of the women, whose knowledge of Mather's life and work had been decently disinfected by *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, did dark honour to their *couturiers*.

I felt sorry for the local Member. Until then I do not believe he had known that such a man as Mather lived within his constituency. Summoned, hastily, to the obsequies by his agent, and abandoned there, he looked uncomfortable and self-conscious, moving nervously on the skirts of the crowd. He would have been much happier had someone asked him to make a speech.

My own purpose in being there was not easy to define, but if this perplexed me at all I had a secondary reason. I stood with other newspapermen who had come to record the last of Mather's rare public appearances.

Spring is a considerate time to die, a pregnant world persuades the living that death is an accident, not a certainty. The churchyard, freshly washed by rain, was as bright as a child's water-colour. Neat squadrons of daffodils deployed beneath the trees and rode out to meet the grey flagstones. By the accident of things their serene colour was a natural tribute to Mather. His paintings had been suffused with their paschal hue, the Mather Yellow.

I remember I recorded this observation in my mind as I leant against the lych-gate. Such is the jackdaw characteristic of a journalist, he collects these details, they are "colour", they are "background", and skil-

fully used, they add depth to what he writes and give a spurious impression of literary effort.

We were so obviously the Press that day. We were stared at curiously or resentfully. I felt that somehow I was disappointing the audience, that I should have my hands in my pockets and my hat on the back of my head. I suppose it is the expression in our faces which always betrays us, a mixture of personal boredom and impersonal curiosity. We had come to give the funeral of Lionel Mather that attention which obligation and circulation demanded, yet we were not excited by it. If great men do not die every day they die often enough for us to become indifferent to the tragedy of their departure. We expected little from Mather; there was nothing new for us to hear at a man's funeral, except perhaps the truth.

Embraced by the belts of our raincoats we stood by the dark silhouette of the Lebanon cedar, thus undisturbed by the emotions of the occasion. The verger, breasting the April wind in his cassock, watched us uneasily from the west door. We had disconcerted him. Although he had probably been a diligent reader of the popular press for many years he could not understand why we wanted to know his name and age, the hour he had risen that morning to prepare the church. He tried to tell us what he thought of Mather, he could not understand that it is the living who make a funeral of interest to newspapermen. Somewhere beneath his cassock were two pound notes, and they must have been troubling his conscience. He had accepted them automatically, before he realised that in return he was expected to allow one of the cameramen to photograph the service from the organ loft. The man was there now, squatting in the dusk and no doubt longing for a cigarette.

Other cameramen stood in the narrow, sunken road outside the gate, moving quickly among the cars along the flint wall. Already they had photographed the President of the Royal Academy and three members of its Council, sober, business-like men who came in a large car, and emerged like black moths from a chrysalis of tartan rugs. With the air of a man who expected this sort of attention the American Ambassador posed courteously by his black Cadillac. I wondered at his being there until I remembered that a Chicago slaughterer had bought Mather's great triptych of the Crucifixion and given it to his country.

At times the only noises on the little hill were the snapping of plates in the cameras, or the cautious scraping of a match from behind the cedar where an agency man was anaesthetising his boredom with a cigarette. On the roof of a shooting-brake, leaning into the ditch, the shining steel tripod of a news-reel camera pointed its black eye at the bell-tower.

When Mather's model came through the gate I stepped back into the shadow of the cedar. It was an involuntary action and one that immediately angered me, for I had wanted to see her.

The cameramen crouched on the gravel before her. She did not look at them, and when they called out for her name, throwing the question sharply into the silence, she ignored them. They followed her up the path, smiling, removing their hats and sweeping their camera-boxes behind them. Sex had made an unexpected appearance, and they were not the men to overlook it.

She turned on them at last, with a frown. "I was a friend." Her voice was controlled, but loud. It carried like a trumpet-note across the whispering. It was all she would say, and the cameramen came back regretfully, sliding plates from their cameras.

She stood by the verges, who greeted her with a nervous smile. The wind stirred her skirt against her legs and pulled at the strip of yellow chiffon loosely knotted about her throat. I wanted to believe that this scarf demonstrated her grief more profoundly than the hypocritical black that stained the rest of the churchyard, but I begrudged her even that. I watched her surlily as she leant against the wall of the church. She pressed the palms of her hands together and held up her fine head until her hair touched the wall. The sun glittered on the large stones of her necklace.

To see her again made me uneasy. I turned to the man beside me. "You should have a word with her." I felt a vindictive pleasure in loosing him on her. "She's the Mather Madonna."

"The what?" A dead match twitched in the corner of his mouth.

"His model. He painted her as the Madonna, and she found his body last week." Then I remembered the specific interests of his paper. "He sold a large nude of her to a Midland gallery."

"Nice body, I should think," he nodded.

"See the story? Beautiful Model Mourns Mather. You could reproduce the nude as an inset."

He grinned. "Why don't you get the story yourself?"

"Our cheesecake is more subtle. I wouldn't give it to you if it was any good to me." I looked at the woman again. She was holding her hair against the wind, her body gracefully following the line of the buttress, and its indolent and voluptuous unconcern was almost blasphemous. "Besides," I said, "if Mather is dead to-day, think how dead he'll be to a Sunday newspaper in four days' time."

He spat out the match at last, and I was glad to see it go. "Why are you here then?"

“Curiosity,” I said, “and I’m an art lover.” It was not an amusing remark, but for some days I had been protecting myself behind a zareba of such banalities.

Some of the reporters who had heard me moved across to the woman, and a cameraman picked up his camera and followed with that peculiar sideways gait of his profession. I saw her straighten her body defensively as they approached. She pushed at her hair, and a frown cut a sharp cleft between her eyes. They grouped themselves about her, smiling, and I saw her speaking. I knew what they must be saying to her, and I knew how cautious and how suspicious her answers would be. But I also knew that for all her caution she would be surprised by what was printed about her to-morrow. I was pleased, maliciously and unreasonably. I felt better than I had since I came to the village.

I had come early, parking my car by the inn and buying myself a whisky in the bar. The long, low-ceilinged room was cool, the sun without warmth washed over a bowl of tulips in the window and glittered on the shoulders of the spirit bottles.

I hoped that the barman would not recognise me, but he did, nodding his head and jerking his shoulders. Anticipation of the morning’s excitement had quickened his feelings, and he smiled.

“Didn’t expect to see you again, sir. Quite a day this for the old place, isn’t it?” He was not a local man. His voice had the bright, bird-like intonation of South London, and there was an affectionate condescension in his voice when he spoke of the village, making a partisan of me. A string of dirty medal ribbons was pinned to his waistcoat and I looked at them with relief, knowing that if his chatter touched my too-sensitive conscience that day I could always divert him by that signal-phrase “What was your D-day plus?” I could

ask it with some authority. I was H-hour plus one, although at the time I would have preferred something later.

I agreed with him that it was quite a day, and I raised my glass to drink, seeing his complacent face distorted through the spinning disc of amber.

"Was he as queer as they say?" The barman picked up a tumbler and began to polish it. "But it takes all sorts, I suppose. Didn't think he'd get a send-off like this, though. Funny old cove like that, I shouldn't have thought nobody would have cared. I mean, I like pictures, but some of these things to-day, *Christ!* A good photograph would be better."

I agreed again. I let him see that I thought most artists were charlatans, and he considered the point for a moment, decided that there was not, after all, the opportunity for friendly argument, and went on. "Three bishops, eh? *And* old Bates's white percheron to pull the coffin. Last time Bates hired out that nag was to pull a float in a Canterbury pageant."

"Mather was a very famous man," I said, and we smiled together at the foolish fancies of the world.

He put the tumbler on the counter and spun it so that its bevelled edge flung fragments of light across his face. "I suppose so. He used to come in here. . . ." He paused uncertainly.

"You told me last time." We looked at each other and smiled again. We had a secret.

"Write pieces for the papers, don't you?" His thin, sharp vowels competed unsuccessfully with a chittering budgerigar in a cage above his head. He looked up at it and thrust his fingers through the bars. "My bird," he said with naïve pride. "I like budgies, they're friendly birds. What paper?" I told him and he nodded. "That's right, we get it here. I like those series you do,

you know, when you get a murderer's wife or girl friend to write him up. Tell me," he leant over and lowered his voice decorously, "they don't write that stuff themselves, not really, do they?"

"We hold their hands a little."

"I thought that's how it was. Told my wife." Then, with a sudden reversal of subject, he went on. "He wasn't ill when you came down here last. I mean it seemed queer to me when the old woman came in and told me he was dead of a sudden. He was in here the day before, looked healthy enough. Is there something queer about him going? I mean all you paper blokes down here and that, must be something."

I did not answer him. I nodded toward the ribbons on his chest. "What was your D-day plus?"

"It was H-hour minus," he said, and I mentally apologised to him. But he was more interested in the present than the past, and he clung resolutely to the subject. "He didn't seem sick to me."

"He was as sick as most of us."

He laughed, a single explosive sound blowing upon his lips. It was completely insincere. "That's good. Come to think of it we're all dying, more or less." He considered this for a moment, picking his teeth. "Funny he should go off like that, though. Funny he should see you too. I mean, he'd never see any newspaper fellows, not as a rule. You were lucky." He tried a jest of his own. "Just in time, eh?"

I repaid him with a reciprocal laugh. "In the nick of it," I agreed.

"I hear the King sent a message." His voice was briskly informative.

"The King is always sending a message," I said. "Would you like a drink?" As he filled his glass I added, "What are the villagers doing to-day?"

He put the tankard on the counter, untouched, and opened his hands to show that he had nothing to conceal. He seemed anxious not to offend. "Some of them will be up there, I suppose. I mean, he wasn't one of us."

"He wasn't one of any of us," I said, and grew tired of playing the cynical newspaperman. I emptied my glass and went up to the church.

The village was asleep in the sun, and the air trembled along its rough walls. The church of Saint Michael and All Angels was walled and buttressed, flanked by a phalanx of skeleton elms. It had that benign, sleeping equanimity, that impression of ageless peace which tempts American neurotics to visit Britain.

A caressing hand of dark ivy curved up one side of its square tower. In the belfry, I knew, was the peal of eight which Mather's father had captained for twenty years. By the west door was the walnut font on which Mather had carved a nursery of cherubim. On the white altar-cloth stood the triptych which a great number of people claimed as the work of a twentieth-century El Greco, and only a few said proved that Mather was essentially blasphemous.

Among the headstones that slipped and listed in the graveyard were many cut with the surname of Mather. They reached back to the late eighteenth century and then were defeated by moss and corrosion. Here the man's family had worked, been bred and buried.

I stood by the cedar and waited, and I smoked, holding the cigarette in my fist, the ember inward. I watched the mourners as they came up the road, contrived symbols they seemed, like extras in a French film. A group of village children refused to take death seriously. They clung with their fingers and toes to the wall, their laughter fluttering along the clumps of

primroses. Once the verger came down to brush them away, and when he failed he smiled at me nervously. "They won't go. I suppose you can't expect them to understand. Perhaps poor Mr. Mather would have liked them there to-day."

My opinion was that Mather would not have noticed them, except as form, colour, shape; blocked colour against the grey wall. But I said, "Had he many friends among the children?"

The verger turned to face me. "Well, no . . . You knew him?"

"In a sense," I said. "I'm a reporter."

"Of course, the Press." He said that as it is always said, as if the Press were a public utility, a convention, something to be accepted along with the water rate and birth control.

"We must expect the Press, naturally," he said, arguing with his own doubts. "You know, Mr. Mather has done Saint Michael's a great honour." He smiled gently toward the red clay scar of the open grave. "The vicar said on Sunday that Mr. Mather could be ranked with the great artists of the past who were all under the inspiration of the church. The Roman Church it was then, of course," he added a little regretfully. "Mr. Mather loved Saint Michael's. Have I given you a list of the principal mourners? It's the sort of thing the Press would want, isn't it? The vicar said so."

"Thank you. You knew Mr. Mather?" After all that had happened I still wanted people to talk about him.

The verger sighed and held his hands in a fan before his cassock. "I suppose nobody really knew him well here."

"The villagers had little to do with him?"

"He was a shy man, you know. People seemed to frighten him. Once I watched him at work here in the

church, when he was painting the Stations. Have you seen them? Wonderful! He told me to go away, very roughly, I thought. I was upset and thought of complaining to the vicar. But now he's dead I think I understand."

"Naturally. Did you like him?"

He smiled at me gently. "You ask a lot of questions. I suppose you're going to write all this up. You won't put my name in the paper, will you?"

"No," I said, "I've nothing to write. I'm sorry to have bothered you. It wasn't impertinence, but we get used to asking questions."

He went back to the church, and he stayed by the west door as the mourners came. It was there that he was trapped by my colleagues and sold his conscience for two pound notes.

The air on the hill was cold, and I shivered, looking down the hill to the village, to the single street twisting in a tortured S past the big bosom of two chestnuts near the inn. A coach of cream and scarlet dribbled a score of young students into the street, and they came up to the church as soberly as they could, their faces too young, too eager for mourning.

A big Daimler brought Lovett to the lych-gate. Oddly, I was not surprised to see him there, he was masking his emotions, I suppose, like everyone else. When he stepped lightly from his car, throwing back the rug with a sweep of his hand, a little circus figure in black and white, my feelings warmed as if a friend had come. Lovett's face was alive with expression, a dozen expressions, moving across it quickly, and the tight framework of his body jerked and unfolded mechanically.

I smiled. I walked across to the lych-gate to be near the old man. The photographers were already hiding

their faces behind their cameras. Others were waiting to greet Lovett, they clustered about him and he shook their hands automatically, nodding his head. The air was full of little sibilant whispers, "*Hello*", "*How D'y'do*", "*Sad occasion, Lovett.*" This excitement at the gate threatened to disrupt the sombre atmosphere, and it encouraged others to raise their voices. From the little group of students there came the single bell-note of a girl's laugh.

I thrust my hand toward the little man. "Good-morning."

Lovett stared at it and let his eyes follow my arm to my face. Then he took the hand as if it were something to which he had not been introduced but was too well bred to ignore. Once his eyes met mine he stared at me with a faintly impatient lift of his eyebrows.

"John Ramsay," I said stiffly, "of the *Sunday Standard*. We met last week."

"Of course, my boy!" He put as much warmth as he could into his thin, high-set voice, but it was the warmth a familiar tradesman might have had the right to expect. I released the bones of his fingers with distaste.

"Nice to see you, my boy, but a sad occasion."

He moved up the path like a dancing marionette. The verger had been warned to expect the Academician, and now he came down the path jubilantly, his cassock sweeping in a triangle of polished cloth. He held out a prayer-book and a service sheet which Lovett took as if they had materialised before him. The verger hurried up the path beside the old man, grasping the lock of the door and pushing back the protesting oak. The dark nave of the church swallowed Lovett suddenly.

It occurred to me then that we were all there now, all of us that mattered. Myself, Lovett, the woman, and

Mather. Only Mather was not alive to appreciate the irony of it.

"Lovett, wasn't it?" It was the reporter with a match between his teeth, a new match.

"That's right. Another friend of the deceased, you might say."

"He's more than that, chum. He'll have a better funeral than this when he goes. I like a day in the country all right, but the Abbey would have made a better story. Or St. Paul's, where you're near the Street. No out-of-town expenses for that, though."

I went under the elms and lit another cigarette. I was alone there and I was glad to be alone, for I wished to see this from a distance. The crowd was going into the church now, and I wondered how the little building could hold so many, cramped there in the black pews where white and yellow flowers splashed the stones.

I found myself thinking of the notice-board on the first floor of the belfry. It still bore the name of George Mather, captain of bellringers, village grocer, sire to a genius. All this little hermit's ancestors had been grocers, or ploughmen, or hedgers, poachers, seamen, robbers, murderers, knights-at-arms—who really knows what one's ancestors were?

I told myself that I should know, or my mother had been a failure. The picture of her drifted across my mind, and I heard her voice declaiming "*Royal's my race!*" like Alan Breck. The thought of her reminded me that we were *not* all here then. To complete the dramatic irony my mother should have been present.

I heard the organ in the church. It began on a throbbing note, the deepest and most sonorous that the wretched collection of pipe and wood could manage, and then it passed with a soft and sudden flourish through a rising octave of sadness.

By the lych-gate the crowd of idlers had thickened. I saw two of the agency men push their way through to the telephone box near the war memorial. Below the wall a motor-cycle pumped and then roared. A photographer, wrapped in his heavy coat, his camera boxed on his back, rode off to keep faith with the evening newspapers. It had been a placid affair so far, no hysterical crowds, no demonstrations. The man with the match had stopped one of the students, a dark-haired girl with plump, naked legs. He was waving his hands before her face and she was holding a laugh tightly at the corners of her mouth.

The belly of the churchyard, studded with dragon's teeth of stones, obscured my view, but I realised that the coffin of Lionel Mather had come and was waiting there within the lych-gate for the vicar. It had arrived on a dray, a dray drawn by a handsome white horse whose bridle foamed with yellow ribbon. That touch made me look for the woman with the yellow scarf, but she was no longer in the churchyard.

The vicar came down the gravel path in his white surplice, his beard, incongruously nautical, jutting out from his chin, and a violet silk stole swinging across his chest.

I watched until the door of the church sucked in the last of the mourners, even the students. The plump little girl with the white legs went in too, looking over her shoulder toward the flicking match with a flush of embarrassed curiosity. The rooks in the elms cut the silence with the sharp edge of their cries.

I stayed until the coffin was brought from the church, and the vicar's voice sang boisterously, "*Man that is born of woman . . .*"

There was no reason for me to speak to Lovett again, yet I stopped him by the gate, outside in the roadway

where his chauffeur waited with the tartan rug. I put my hand on the old man's arm, noticing that the cloth of the jacket seemed to cover nothing but a ridge of bone.

"Mr. Lovett . . ."

He looked at me. "Yes?" he said. "Ah, the reporter. You don't want any comment from me, not to-day, do you, young fella?"

No, I did not want any comment. "There were some documents," I heard myself saying to his pink, wrinkled face. "We made Photostats of them before we returned them to you. For record purposes, of course."

"You did?" he said, without emotion.

"Yes, Mr. Lovett. In view of the circumstances I suppose we should destroy them?"

He smiled. The smile came so quickly to his face that it was almost a grin. "Surely your editor can decide that? Good-day, m'boy."

He turned to his chauffeur who wrapped the rug about him. Clutching the corners at his hips Lovett hobbled into the great glass box of the Daimler. He raised a hand in farewell, a hand so full of character that it could have passed as a portrait of the man.

I thought how much like a hearse the car looked as it drove away. Lovett was an old man, close enough to death for the thought to occur to him too.

TWO

I SAW Mather on three occasions only, the first was a week or so before his death. Yet, by some dramatic irony, he had been part of the fabric of my boyhood. He was a young man then, and, although he was already famous, his name would have meant little to us in Kinlochleven had it not been for my father.

My father was a devout man, no zealot or bigot but deeply perplexed by anyone who did not share his literal interpretation of the Scriptures. At the time when both he and I were seeking some neutral ground on which we could meet intellectually, something half-way between my interest in the *Magnet* and his in the *Scotsman*, Mather's religious paintings were beginning to startle people by their violent unorthodoxy. His vision of Christ as a sunken-cheeked neurotic outraged my father's sense of decency, and because there was no one else in our family, least of all my mother, over whom my father could pour his disgust and Episcopalian indignation, he turned to me. He talked to me on many things as we took those long evening walks to escape the suffocating atmosphere of my mother's illness. We would walk briskly up the glen, his stick tapping out a military rhythm, his gentle head nodding, and his tongue running away with the delight of liberation. I suppose he thought I was listening, and certainly one side of my mind paid filial attention while the other half was away up the brae on its own business.

My father would inveigh against Mather with a fine

choice of invective and apothegm that rarely appeared in his sermons. It was only many years later, long after my father had passed unreluctantly to death, that I realised Mather was an artist honoured by my father's Church, and not a militant anti-Christ. For all that a natural resentment against him, as if he had been responsible in part for my father's unhappiness, remained with me.

Thus when I first saw the man my impressions were subjective. He was a bogey from my boyhood. You cannot be taught to dislike a man when you are a child and not seek some justification for that dislike when first you meet him.

I met him as I meet so many people, among the smoke, the rattle of glasses, and the conversational banalities of a Press party. A newspaperman's social life is generally conducted on the calculated hospitality of others. What was the reason for this particular party I cannot remember, although it was, I think, the unveiling of a plaque on a house wherein George Stubbs had once lived. I am not certain of this because I was neither personally nor professionally interested in the reason for the whisky I wished to drink. A pasteboard invitation had been placed on my desk, and pinned to it was a note from Vaughan: "*We are not interested in this unless you can pick up a bit of dirt for the diary. Just help yourself to a drink.*"

I found a flat-roofed, white-plastered villa near the Boltons. A century and a half before it may have been a pleasant rural retreat, an hour's coach ride from the Haymarket. Now, on a wretched March day, with a malicious wind blowing sleet across a bomb-ruined square, it appeared a derelict slum. There were lights behind the windows, and I could hear the noise of glasses and voices before I pushed through the gate.

The door was opened by a white-jacketed employee of a catering firm. He looked at me with resignation, and deciding that since I obviously was not an artist I must be a newspaperman he said, "The bar is inside, sir."

I never attempt to talk on such occasions. I like to finish a sentence, or at least feel confident that my listener wants me to finish it. I like a conversation to develop leisurely and not be conducted in a series of hysterical, despairing shouts across the jostling shoulders of other people. So on this occasion I went straight to the bar, drank, and ate little pieces of jellied toast.

The tiny room was full of men and women who appeared to be enjoying themselves, however. A lark-throated young man waved a slip of paper in my face and asked me if I had met Mr. Lovett, and when I took the easier course of saying that I did not wish to he asked me if I would like to meet Mr. Mather. I must have said no to that too, for this enervating semi-virus in a jacket of magenta corduroy raised his eyebrows and drifted away, fanning himself with his sheaf of papers.

He was gone before the name of Mather made its full impact on me. Perhaps it was the closeness of the air in the room, the shrill, relentless noise, the sad face of the barman, but I thought suddenly of Kinlochleven and the velvet-fingered mist coming down the side of *Stob Ban*. I thought of my father stopping in the middle of a vehement attack on the Great Demon Mather to point his ash stick at the beauty of the afternoon. A nostalgic wondering made me stand on my toes and look about the room in search of Mather. Faces swam toward me out of the cigarette-smoke, bright-eyed, open-mouthed, a zoological bedlam, the terrifying spectacle of men and women competing in some fantastic ritual. Mather could have been any of them or

none of them. It seemed to me that they had ceased to be human beings, and I settled back on my heels. But when Matthew Clayton pushed his way to me I acknowledged the greeting I received from his eyebrows, and shouted, "Which one is Mather?"

"Over here!" I saw his lips say, and I was pulled to the door where the air was clearer and the noise less overpowering. Clayton was an artist, a student or a teacher I had met somewhere. His nervous, dyspeptic face, balanced on a pale bow tie, and his studied effeminacy were not too objectionable. On an occasion like this I could even like him.

"Isn't this too orthodox for you, Matthew?"

"I'm here for the same reason the Press is," he waved his glass demonstratively. "Also to sneer at all these successful people."

"Sneer in Mather's direction, then."

He straightened his tie, holding his head to one side and smiling at me archly. "You're lucky. Both of them are here. Lovett *and* Mather. Interview them both and you'll have a story."

"It takes years to make a journalist," I said, "but there's always someone who can tell us what a story is. I don't care if they're both here. I was thinking of my father and I thought it would be a tribute to his memory to look at Mather and growl."

"Your father was a minister or something, wasn't he?" There was an inference that I had been unlucky in some paternal lottery. He grasped my elbow tightly, as much to support himself as guide me, and he stood on his toes, thrusting out his head on his extraordinarily long neck. His black hair was too Byronic, his cream shirt too obviously nylon and his face too aesthetic in profile. I became embarrassingly conscious of my masculinity.

"He's over there against the wall. You *must* sec him now. *She's* with him." I had forgotten that Clayton spoke in italics.

He pulled my arm, dragging me through that vortex to the bar again. Some of my colleagues, forming an immovable and indifferent phalanx on the other side of the bar, stared at me, nodded, and returned to their talk of shop.

"*There!*" Clayton said, "along the far wall. The ridiculous little man next to that lusty Madonna."

My father, I felt, would have been disappointed. The great blasphemer was a dirty, untidy little man, the sort of man who is often seen in the corner of a Lyons' tea shop, furtively eating a bun and talking to himself, and cracking his knuckles unhappily. He was dressed carelessly in a thick tweed suit that was unused to his awkward frame. It looked unworn, but its style, with its high lapels and crude attempt at waisting, was at least twenty years old. His small head was made even smaller by the enormous knot of his brown woollen tie. His eyes squinted suspiciously at the people who pressed on him. He was unceasingly thrusting his hands into the pockets of his jacket, withdrawing them to massage his fingers and then pushing them into the pockets again. He was not speaking, nor was he listening, and the men and women about him seemed to be attacking his sullen silence with the sharp weapons of their voices.

No one could have looked long at him while the woman stood beside him. The eye was challenged by her arrogant beauty. She was tall and majestic, a great-boned woman whose body had the fine architectural balance of breasts, hip and thigh. I cannot remember what she wore except that whatever it was it must have been in harmony with her beauty, for there was no apparent paradox. Her black hair was swept into a knot

at the back of her neck and held there by a great Spanish comb. She held Mather's arm, and now and then she would look down to his face and the expression that passed between them hurt me. Any man looking at her would feel as I felt, I suppose. She touched the primitive, the carnal, the desirous, and her evident devotion and loyalty to this musty, tweed-wrapped man was difficult to accept.

I turned at Clayton's hiss of delight. "You should take a particular interest in her."

I lit a cigarette and saw that my hand was trembling. "Why?"

"Your boss knew her at one time."

"Cooper? You mean my editor?"

"No, I mean his Lordship."

"So? Our Lordship knows everybody. Who is she?"

"The daughter of one of your Lordship's friends, I'm told. He stood in loco parentis to her after his friend died."

"Sounds quixotic enough to be true," I said.

"It is true. He was devoted to her. Then later she walked out on him over some quarrel they had. I always gathered it was entirely her fault." Clayton looked across the room, and from the manner in which he did so I realised that he too resented her inaccessibility. Then he added inconsequentially: "Anyway it's as easy to hate her as to love her."

I laughed at him. But he went on: "There's no need for you to be so damned supercilious, John. What you're thinking of her is plain on your face. Mather met her when he was looking for a model for his *Annunciation*. Can you imagine her as the *Virgin Mary*?"

The thought pleased him, and he snickered his amusement, but it angered me, and I left him abruptly.

Unconsciously almost, I moved toward the group about Mather. I was staring at the woman with a calf-like curiosity. I saw that her eyes rested on no one for long, and there was no feeling in them, no warmth. The people who had trapped this oddly matched pair against the wall were making the best of Mather's rare emergence from solitude. Their voices rapped indecently on his soul.

"I thought your Resurrection one of the most orgiastic . . ."

"When are you going to do another nude of Marion . . .?"

"The power you put in those magnificent thighs . . ."

Marion must have been the woman. When her name was mentioned the muscles at the corners of her full lips tightened momentarily.

The nagging undertow of the crowd pulled me away from them. I was ready to go home and was beginning to elbow my way toward the door when the young man in magenta corduroy hammered on a chair and called. "Quiet everybody, *please!* Please be quiet. Mr. Lovett is to speak. . . ."

I stayed involuntarily. Lovett's name has a magic like that. As a painter, as an Academician he has merit and ability that I could not judge, but I know his value to the Press. Although it was too early for a Sunday newspaperman to look for an old envelope on which to scribble notes, I stayed to listen.

There was a rattle of chairs against the wall, a cloud-burst of sycophantic laughter, and then, rising above the heads like a pantomime devil, Lovett was lifted to a bookshelf. I am a short man but I should not think Lovett is any higher than my shoulder. That day he looked neatly in proportion: black coat, full black cravat with a winking pearl in its centre, soft white shirt and

striped trousers that were too short for his legs and revealed ankles as delicate as a woman's. His face was a parody of ferocity, soft pink skin glowing behind a beaked nose, and eyes with a mischievous glitter. The thumb of one hand was tucked inside a pocket of his double-breasted waistcoat, and he looked at us with a highly successful mixture of pleasure, contempt and impish amusement.

"Good-evening," he said. "Well, now you're all ready to listen to some horse-sense . . ."

There was a cackle of laughter at this. A glass slipped somewhere and a woman screamed as the liquor fell on her skirt. Lovett regarded the incident with faint impatience, withdrew a handkerchief and slowly wiped his hands. There was the same tension in the air that you can sense in a theatre when an experienced actor walks from the wings. I suppose it had been intended that Lovett should make some sort of speech about Stubbs, or whoever it was in whose honour we had been consuming canapes. But nobody expected Lovett to make more than a passing reference to that.

He wasted very little time on the subject. With a characteristic sweep of his startlingly white hands he brushed the man into an elysium beyond criticism and boisterously mounted his chosen hobby-horse.

As he spoke his voice rose in tone, his face became pinker and little drops of saliva flecked his chin. He had been drinking, but it was the excitement of his emotions which had loosened his tongue and banished whatever sense of restraint he might normally have felt. He seemed to be addressing each of us personally, as if one of his long fingers had hooked itself in our laps. He held a little sheaf of notes in his hand, but not once did he look at them; indeed, as he spoke he began to shred the paper, allowing it to flutter to the floor.

We waited and we were content to wait, knowing that he would satisfy our appetites eventually. He skipped briskly through a three-sentence survey of the political system, a ribald jest at the Welfare State and an enthusiastic plea that all artists should have "a fat private income". This he contradicted in the next sentence by declaring that he had painted his best when living on fifteen shillings a week. He swayed on his delicate feet and stared at our faces, not altogether unaware of the paradox but adhering to it with a supreme contempt for our intelligence.

For a second or two he remembered Stubbs, summoned him back from obscurity to commend his artistic integrity and his ability to paint the rumps of cart-horses, and then abruptly hastened him into the background again.

Then the slow fuse which he had been lighting reached the powder-mine of his emotions and exploded it beneath us. "Daubers!" he declared. "There are men to-day who are milking public funds for a lot of damned, blasphemous, outrageous daubs that I wouldn't give a butcher's boy tuppence for!"

He said "damned" like a Regency buck. He moistened his words with his lips as they left his mouth. The unmusical cadence of his voice had a bitter, wounding effect on us. His body danced on that unsteady bookshelf as if wires held it to the ceiling. He was enjoying his audience, and their laughter followed the movements of his hands and lips like an obedient orchestra. I saw one of the agency men put his glass on a shelf and pull a piece of paper from his pocket.

"There was a fella the other day," said Lovett, gripping the lapels of his jacket with both hands, "got two thousand pounds from some committee of grocers in the Midlands. Two thousand! You'd think they were

buying the job by the acre, and, by God, it was large enough, wasn't it? You know the piece. *Gethsemane* the fella called it. *Christ!*" Perhaps realising the inappropriateness of the expression he hurried on, "Christ was represented by a cadaverous character in a bowler hat and a ready-made suit, a deformed thing with a head too large, and his hands reaching to his knees." The laughter cackled again, but this time it was less sycophantic than cruel.

"You know this fella's work. One of the 'moderns' you call him, don't yer? If you can't paint, call yourself a modern. This fella's been going on like this for years, and you're still fools enough to pay him for thumbing his nose at you. They even make him an R.A. I told the Council. Told them, make that bloke an R.A. and you're spitting on Reynolds. Look at Millais!" his voice ravished his complaisant audience. "Look at Holman Hunt, Ford Madox Brown! Look at an Ingres nude, will you? There's a nude that is a nude, not a string of sausages!"

I had listened to Lovett before this and I had seen how his audience laughed *at* him rather than with him, at a reactionary clown whose outrageous opinions amused rather than offended them. But on this occasion there was a difference, and they were not amused by one man but by two, by a bitter hatred and enmity that they found only comic. As they laughed they stood on their toes and craned their heads in the direction of Mather, avidly, savagely curious to see what effect their laughter and Lovett's anger were having on him. They screened him from me and I could not see his face.

"These fellas are all right for the Bond Street boys, the Majorca-touts, the babies who paint in purples and cubes. But this fella could paint once," there was a

puzzled, injured tone in Lovett's voice, and he was no longer smiling delightedly. "Was a damned good painter too. Painted a fine Crucifixion when he was younger, but have you seen his latest Crucifixion? A bit of obscene blasphemy, with an electric train coming out of a tunnel below Calvary?"

His eyes looked everywhere in the room but at that nondescript, flagellated figure against the wall.

"If I had my way I'd have this fella's work burned by the public hangman."

I saw an agency man look up sharply, smile his pleasure, and bend his head again to his scribbling. He must have known, as I knew, that what Lovett was saying was grossly slanderous, and that any newspaper would pause cautiously before publishing a word of it. But he scribbled his notes, and somehow, suitably bowdlerised, they would give Lovett his column inches in the morning. I silently complimented the public relations officer who had organised this. With luck even Stubbs might be mentioned.

Lovett's face had lost its pink flush and had become pale and strained. With the health and vigour thus gone from it, it now looked only petty and malicious, but so spell-binding was the power of his contempt and anger and pain that it was impossible not to feel an answering derision for the victim of it.

His sincerity was terrifying, no longer entertaining only. How long he could have continued to speak I do not know, but suddenly he was interrupted by a scuffle in the corner where Mather stood.

I saw the woman pushing her way through the crowd with the robust determination of a man, her head held high on her beautiful neck, her eyes full of anger. The crowd parted before her, smiling sheepishly at the little man who shuffled behind her. His arms hung listlessly

by his side, his body seemed to be slowly shrinking inside his clumsy clothes. He looked up once as he passed, and by accident it was into my face. His cheeks were quite bloodless and his lips were quivering faintly. His eyes were pained, but tearless.

At the door the magenta butterfly fluttered up to them both, his hands waving protestingly and his lips making rustling, soothing noises. The woman turned gracefully on the heel of her shoe. She regarded him for a long moment and then slapped his face. So well controlled was the action that it might have been rehearsed. The noise of the blow filled the silence, and the young man stood there transfixed while the marks of the woman's fingers grew to scarlet on his cheeks. Mather and the woman went silently, and the door banged.

Lovett broke the silence. He began to laugh. He stood there on the bookshelf, his thumb hooked in his waistcoat, his head held back, and he cackled. His laughter was nervous, I think, and he was embarrassed by the realisation that he had hurt someone, even someone he so obviously detested. But he laughed, and below him there rose the answering giggles until the room was full of a silly amusement.

I pushed my way to the door. I was angry, but not so much with Lovett as with Mather and what I thought was Mather's cowardice. Clayton was leaning on the wall by the door, his arms folded carefully, his feet crossed and his cream socks showing. He raised one hand casually. "Good, eh?"

"I wonder you didn't walk out too," I said. "You're one of the Bond Street boys, a cubes and purple baby."

"Oh, Lovett's an idiot," he said easily, "but I wish he *had* attacked me. It would be worth the publicity."

"Then why not slap somebody's face and walk out?"

"Damn that woman," he said angrily, "but what an

artist Mather is! I'm told he sweats when he paints, turns his inside out." He looked at me curiously. "A journalist wouldn't understand that."

"Good-night."

He caught my arm. "Hang on, John, you're missing a story. There's more to this, you know. I'm told Lovett has something on Mather, why not go and see him?"

"I'm on Mather's side," I said, but in fact I was not. I was angry with the man and I did not know why. Perhaps my father's resentment still lingered inside me, or perhaps I felt a sympathy for Lovett's injured vanity, even while disliking his boorishness. Perhaps it was in fact something more personal, an uneasy disapproval of that contradictory relationship between Mather and the woman.

Whatever it was, the thought of them both stayed in my mind. I rarely speak of my work to my mother, yet when I went home that evening I told her that I had seen him.

She looked at me from her pillow, her eyes seeing beyond me, and she said, "The artist, John? Your father disliked him, didn't he? I remember when we lived in the Highland house your father would get so angry about it all."

She had spoken of the Highland house, and of course I had to sit there and listen while her memory dragged out the past and played with it like a child.

THREE

THE newspaper which employed me at twenty-one guineas a week was a living thing. It took control of the men who worked for it and produced them no less than they produced it. What makes the Mather Story of real significance to me now is that it was the only occasion on which I felt compelled to act independently of the governor valve that controls the psychological machinery of a national newspaper.

We all have our temptations to do good, and they are a professional hazard. Yet few of us can survive an effort to be men of principle without appearing faintly ridiculous at the same time.

This is not to say that I did not have an affection for the *Sunday Standard*. Its amoral power gave us all a feeling of distinction, and its picaresque behaviour was, in retrospect at least, always amusing.

Consider the *Sunday Standard* as an emotional and short-tempered being. In matters of no real importance it could be sentimental and uncynical. Although in many respects its behaviour singularly resembled that of Pavlov's unfortunate dog, there were times when a more accurate understanding of its nature could be found in those medieval humours of spleen, choler, phlegm and black bile.

It had an impudent charm and a high degree of technical efficiency, but its memory was weak and irrational. This was perhaps inevitable for it postured on an elastic spine of principle, and declaimed its beliefs so noisily

that its readers were beaten into cowed acquiescence or deafened indifference. It was in its weakest moments of principle that we were most convinced of the *Sunday Standard's* good health, for its true temperature chart was, after all, its circulation figures.

The yardstick by which we learnt to measure the behaviour of the world was fashioned from ancient Judaic ethics. We believed in an eye for an eye, we believed that there was no connection between good and evil, and in sin we found an unending source of entertainment.

This was partly due to a sound understanding of our readers' tastes, and partly due to the owner of the paper, a deeply religious, recently ennobled old bachelor.

Four million people (sworn to by the Audit Bureau of Circulation) digested the *Sunday Standard* with their breakfast, but we were far more conscious of the tastes and demands of this one man whom we called "The Reader". It was a simpler task to satisfy the demands of one man than the desires of four million.

I never met The Reader until I became responsible for the Mather Story, but his influence and personality were omnipresent. He lived in a dark, baroque mansion in Hertford, flanked by the Bible and Hansard, a primitive Jahveh speaking through a dictaphone to his editors, and through them to the world. His directives, typed in red capitals on slight slips of onion-paper, were the voltage generators of the papers he owned. Our regard for him was an amalgam of respect, admiration and uneasiness. To work for any one of his papers was an envied certificate of professional ability. He made our reputations merely by employing us, and in return we disinterestedly sharpened our skill on his grindstone.

His newspapers carried his messages, and none more

resolutely than the *Sunday Standard*. Yet while their circulations rose, the messages went ignored. The irony of this was not hard to understand. In order to reach the widest audience he demanded the highest circulations. To obtain high circulations his editors turned themselves and their staffs and their newspapers into popular entertainers, clowns and buffoons. We took nothing seriously. We were flippant, irreverent and sceptical about everything, except the messages that came in thunderous tones from Hertford. When we printed them it was not surprising that our well-trained readers regarded their gravity as some urbane flippancy and did not take them seriously.

As he aged, The Reader suffered from recurrent attacks of migraine, and we knew the precise moment when they afflicted him, for they sent shock tremors down through each strata of his organisation. He was sententious and humorous. He was sanctimonious, even honest once you accepted his own premises. He paid us well. It was not surprising that when called upon we showed the strength of his convictions.

We were housed on that precipice of granite which drops away from the south side of Fleet Street to the river. If you can be diverted by dramatic irony, a Carmelite monastery once occupied the site, and later the bordellos, the gin-shops and the thieves' kitchens of Alsatia.

The building was red and triangular, shaped like the prow of a ship, its façade notched by a series of little hollows in which stood the sandstone statues of anonymous ecclesiastics. Long ago someone had looked up at these figures and christened the building "The Cloisters". The name persisted.

Daily from a dark hole in its side the Cloisters spewed out news, comment, passion and prejudice.

For me the Mather Story began, as all Sunday newspapers begin, on a Tuesday morning. It was eleven-thirty. From the window of the reporters' room I was staring down at the darker, unpretentious side of London that litters the south bank of the Thames. Dust-haze and steamer-smoke about Tower Bridge, a great river-wall of warehouses, pock-marked with broken windows. From the room one could see the trams swinging up toward the hump of Blackfriars Bridge, and hear their eerie whining.

The first edition was still five days away, and the *Sunday Standard* lay in exhaustion from its week-end orgasm. We sat indolently, leaning against the fly-blown walls, smoking, reading, waiting for the mid-day conference. Robertson was composing his expenses sheet, his thin, ascetic lips moving silently about his cigarette, one long finger searching the bald area of his skull for a hair of encouragement. Dawes, dyspeptic, waxen-skinned, and red-eyed, was comparing the *Daily Worker* with *The Times*, and making notes on a pad at his elbow. Purcell was there too, I suppose, in his corner, and the typist, Penny, sitting at her desk behind a bowl of primroses. Perhaps there were others, I cannot remember. About us all was a listlessness. I do not like Tuesday mornings.

On Tuesday mornings the web my mother spins about me when she has me to herself still entangles my thoughts. I think of Kinlochleven and my boyhood, and so persuade myself that deep inside me youth is still awaiting release.

On Tuesdays I wear a tartan tie of my mother's sept, the Appin Stewarts. She buys me a new one each Christmas, and wearing it once a week is my one surrender to her romantic fancies. On Tuesdays my mind is still full of pictures of dark Mamore and my father

walking up the glen road toward *Stob Ban*. I congratulate myself with the thought that I am at least half Highlander, a different race from the Lowland Scots who have filled executive chairs in the Street with their broad buttocks, and the bar of the Press Club with their broader Doric. I am in the mood of the landless ones, the children of the mists.

But if someone were to come to me on Tuesday morning and offer me a house and an income in Lochaber I would not accept them. An exile has no real desire to go home. I live in a South Kensington Square where the land of the Gael can be visualised without disillusion.

I remember Llewellyn coming into the reporters' room, for it was Llewellyn who sent me to Vaughan and Vaughan who assigned me to the Mather Story. Llewellyn's old chesterfield hung open in two heavy folds, dusted with ash and greasy at the cuffs. He dropped his hat on his desk and walked about the room, rubbing his hands. He lit a cigarette and left it hanging from the centre of his mouth as if he had no further interest in it.

If Llewellyn had thought a title necessary he could have called himself the Chief Reporter. He had been with the paper for twenty-three years, beginning as a ship reporter at Southampton and coming before *The Reader's* notice when the old man had gone to America. Llewellyn's skill in managing *The Reader's* luggage and escorting his woman companion back to London had so satisfied the old man that young Llewellyn had been transferred to London. There he established a reputation as a hard-news reporter. He deserved it. You could place Llewellyn in the City of Cork or Scattle, and within twenty-four hours he would organise it so that nothing could happen without his knowledge. His

reactions were instinctive, he regarded humanity as cloth to be tailored by men like himself. His thoughts were no deeper than a shallow burn, but they moved as rapidly as that stream in spate.

I liked him, and I had learnt much from him. I liked them all, for they were part of the architecture of my life. If the public could have seen them, however, it might have wondered by what spiritual metamorphosis such men were able to produce the paper they did.

Llewellyn sat at his desk, still in his chesterfield. The cigarette flicked in his mouth as he spoke. "No conference this morning," he said, "and I've got a message for you, John."

I did not think it could be important. I was staring out of the window, trying to convince myself that I had only to walk across the bridge below and in a few moments I would be on the Ballachulish road.

Llewellyn continued to talk. Silence offends him, and he feels compelled to fill it with bantering, inconsequential chatter. "We must find an idea that will take Llewellyn abroad this week. A trip to Italy, down to the sun. Now there must be a nice little story in Italy which Llewellyn can cover. What's happening in Italy, Penny?" His sad, watering eyes stared at the girl.

"Ask Mr. Robertson, Dai."

We laughed, and Robertson scratched his bald head ruefully. A year ago Cooper had despatched him to Naples to find an old woman who, according to an agency report, had hammered on the lid of her coffin just in time to prevent it, and her, being lowered in a grave. Unexpected returns from the dead always make good Sunday newspaper stories, and Robertson had flown away with his wallet full of lire. Four days later a cable arrived from somewhere in the Apennines saying that the story was untrue, the old peasant was in fact

buried, and presumably dead by now. Two days later a further cable from Florence informed us that Robertson was following another lead, and then there was silence for a week. Robertson had served in Italy during the war, and there was no doubt in anybody's mind what lead he was following. Cooper's cable irately discharging Robertson might have been sent had not floods in the Po Valley interrupted the reporter's love-making and enabled us to have the first story from the area. Robertson had that sort of luck.

Llewellyn looked at him with an emotionless face. "You wouldn't know a story until it pushed you out of bed."

"Someone else's bed," I said, and we laughed and then slipped back into silence.

"There's a message I've got for you, John. . . ."

"When you remember it, Dai." I looked contentedly at the sky. Cables of smoke from the far bank were stretched obliquely to an anchorage of clouds.

"Vaughan . . ." said Llewellyn, "Vaughan wants you."

Thus the week began. Vaughan was in his office, a box of metal and glass along the corridor from the reporters' room. In daylight it was as clinically cold and functional as any office within the Cloisters, but at dusk it glowed a subtle rose from the shade of the desk lamp. It had one long window that overlooked a white-tiled ventilation shaft and the twisted entrails of the building's plumbing.

Because it was only Tuesday Vaughan was wearing his jacket. That jacket was a storm warning. So long as it was stretched across his broad shoulders we knew that there was no urgency in anything.

I liked Vaughan, although he was amoral, an opportunist, even ignorant. Perhaps it was because of these

things I liked him, for he was not a hypocrite and he had a sturdy loyalty to his friends.

He was not yet forty, but he looked no older than he had when I first met him ten years before, and probably would still look no older in ten years' time. He was a man of many vanities and nagging fears that found a physical outlet in an incessant stroking and plucking of his moustache. If there was any subtlety in him at all it hid itself successfully behind the melon-blandness of his face and the thick lenses of his glasses. The pale hair that grew in one unnatural swathe from the centre of his forehead was exasperatingly neat. His shirt was white, his silk tie of dark crimson and his suit a well-tailored, well-brushed blue hopsack. He wore such clothes not so much from taste but because they were the uniform of the successful newspaperman.

When I entered his office he was resting his head against the earpiece of his telephone. He nodded at me and jerked a thumb toward a chair. The heat of the room was intense, and a single bead of perspiration glittered on his temple. As he swung idly in his chair his short legs kicked the turmoil of newspapers on the floor. He grunted at the mouthpiece, pulled at his moustache and then shouted with laughter.

I listened as the noise dropped down the ventilation well, bouncing from the tiles to the plumbing and rebounding from the bottom.

"Right, Walter, I'll put Ramsay on to it and send him in to you." He replaced the telephone and stared at me. "Had a nice week-end?"

"Fair," I said, trying to remember what I had done with it.

"How's your mother?"

I remembered now what I had done. I had waited on my mother. "Like any invalid," I said.

"Women are hell," he said, "but you should be married. Now, any ideas?" He rubbed his hands together. "Twelve pages this week, we'll want some feature ideas."

"Why is there no conference this morning?"

"Walter wants his earlier. Come on, how about some ideas."

I grinned at him. "We're reporters," I said, "high powered and highly paid executives like you are paid for ideas."

We sat in silence, staring at each other. "You know," he said, "there's something we ought to do. All these nigs coming into the country and starting dope rackets along the Edgware Road. We ought to do a probe into it. Got any ideas?"

"I don't know what a nig is," I said.

"All right," he said, "a coloured gentleman. But they're nigs to our readers."

"God help our readers." And then after a pause. "How about sending me roving for a few days, just to pick up something?"

"You know you can't go out of town overnight, John. You asked for that yourself, you said you couldn't leave your mother alone."

I sat in silence then, feeling a flat, spiritless sensation at the pit of my stomach. "What happened to that page lead I did on Saturday?"

"It made two editions," said Vaughan, "but Walter didn't like it."

It had been a silly story, but even then it is disturbing to have a story killed because of an editor's whim. Something of this piqued annoyance must have been evident in my face for Vaughan said, "I'll make it up to you, some time."

"What does the editor want me to do, Jack? What

was this thing you were talking about when I came in?"

"You're a cultured man, John," he said with mocking pomposity. "Not like the rest of us common journalists. I've seen you reading the *New Statesman*. Do you know Lovett and Mather?"

"I don't know them, I've seen them. They were at that Press affair you sent me to some days ago. Remember? The slapping incident."

He nodded. "What are they like?"

"They're not fond of each other. Lovett's a rarity, he's actually as you would imagine after reading the Press. I'd say he hated Mather, but he's being old fashioned about it. Mather's respectable now, and the Church will probably canonise him when he dies."

Vaughan stared at me and pushed his tongue against the corner of his mouth. "Walter heard something at the Savage about them both. He says he got it from Lovett himself, but that's probably his usual flam. Sounds a nice scandalous story . . ."

"I heard about it, something about it anyway," I said, suddenly remembering Clayton.

"Well . . . it wasn't on your schedule."

"A story about *Art*?" I said. "In the *Sunday Standard*?"

My schoolboy sarcasm made him surly. "You'll have to see Walter about it. You turning out for the team this year?"

We talked on in a desultory fashion. We talked of cricket, and Vaughan grumbled in his self-deprecatory fashion of the office politics that threatened to rob him of the captaincy of the editorial team.

"What's the good of being News Editor," he said half-seriously, "if you can't be captain? You bastards out-vote me and there'll be some unpleasant stories to do."

When we had talked enough, and his secretary came in with a file of letters in her hand and an impatient look in her eye, he said, "Go and see Walter. It might make a page lead."

"Another one on the spike?" I said. "I've never known a Tuesday story that was still alive by Saturday." I looked down the well of the ventilation shaft. Far below little people with eldritch voices were quarrelling as they prepared an obnoxious stew of cabbages. "Don't you ever feel compelled to throw yourself down this?"

Vaughan was on his feet, patting his stomach with one hand and holding out the other for the letters the girl was holding. "It's time I started drinking again. My suits are getting too big for me. What's that?"

"Don't you ever want to throw yourself down this shaft?"

"Why should I? With all I have to live for."

"And what's that?"

"There's my duodenal." He laughed. What Vaughan said was never very amusing, but his laughter was always infectious and I joined him in it. He walked to the door with his arm on my shoulder, and I did not know whether it was spontaneous or premeditated. He was proud of his reputation for being able to manage men, so perhaps there was no sincerity in the affectionate squeeze of my shoulder.

As I left I heard him saying with mock bawdiness to his secretary, "O.K., Ann, put your beautiful body in the arm-chair." :

* * *

I never entered Walter Cooper's room without reluctance and the same doubt and embarrassment that used to overwhelm me when I stood outside my

headmaster's study. Although easily approached by his staff, and proud of the fact that he was ready to speak with them at any time, the editor was a man with whom conversation was impossible. He liked to talk, but his feelings and his thoughts were surrounded by an ice-cap that made warmth impossible, and his apparent sociability was enjoyed on his own terms only.

I suppose it was his lack of true sensitivity that embarrassed me always, yet he was well known for his emotional reactions. His writing, when it was not polemical and pamphleteering, was either sentimental or heavily jocose. There is a story, which I am inclined to believe, that when one day a reporter was being despatched to a road accident Cooper called after him jovially from behind a pillow of cigar smoke, "*Bring back plenty of dead!*"

Before the reporter returned the tape-machine began to tap out the fact that seventeen young schoolgirls had been killed in the accident. Cooper stood like a shaken monolith in the middle of the News Room, blowing his nose fiercely and saying, "I wouldn't have said that if I'd thought."

When Vaughan was drunk enough, or when he was bold enough, he would tell us this story, using his gift of mimicry to burlesque our editor racked by emotion.

When I entered his office that morning Cooper was standing in a pose that was part ancient Roman, part Pagliacci. His head was flung back to take his eyes from the smoke of his cigar, and his untidy jacket hung open on his shoulders like a toga. The long window of his office, shrouded at the corners by full, crimson curtains, looked across the river to the misted quarry of south London. A balustraded garden outside the window was soft with spring turf, and along the grey stones were

ranked the halberds of scarlet tulips. They had been forced in The Reader's greenhouses, and now they trembled indignantly in the wind, as if they resented their premature exposure.

I paused discreetly and then closed the door. At the rap of wood Cooper wheeled his stomach about and took the wet cigar from his mouth. My first impression of him was always of his bulk, a thick body and broad shoulders which extended further to the width of his belly. Yet his head was small, dominated by the dark thumb-prints of his dyspeptic eyes.

He smiled pleasantly enough and walked back to his desk with that startling, mincing gait that never failed to surprise me. The heavy and ungainly torso was carried daintily on short legs. It was graceful but it was comic, for it produced an undulating, bouncing movement, and my smile, which fortunately he took as an answer to his own, was involuntary.

He rested his cigar on a large bottle-glass tray. "Sit down, laddie."

His office was rich with the scent of the tobacco. His desk was antique and the carpet a fine Persian of such glowing hues that one seemed to be walking on burning coals. Cooper liked comfort of body and mind, and he was rich and powerful enough to secure both. He was a living refutation of the fallacy that money cannot buy happiness. He was rich. He had edited the paper for seventeen years, and if he was no longer the youngest editor in Fleet Street, he was certainly the richest. It was typical that he should be proud of this. He respected money and he despised poverty. At one time or another all of us who worked for him had been called upon to write little paeans to this man or that who had made money and kept it.

I sank back into the thick leather chair. I subsided so

slowly that Cooper's desk seemed to be rising in the air before me, and when finally I came to rest I was forced to strain back my neck to look into his face. I lit a cigarette to take my attention from the room. Cooper watched the action with mild disapproval, and then put the cigar into his mouth again. He would not tell me that I should not smoke without permission, but he would not forget that I had done so. He would not have understood that only nervousness had made me do it.

"What was it I wanted to see you about?"

I had worked for him too long to be caught by such a sly device. Had I said I did not know he would have picked up his telephone and roundly abused Vaughan for not briefing me more fully. He would do this not because he believed Vaughan deserved it, but because he believed that such demonstrations were good for discipline.

So I said, "The Mather Story, sir." I managed to say that "sir" without too much difficulty. "Mr. Vaughan said I should see you in case there was more you wished to add."

He looked up from the cigar. A spasm jerked his body from the rotundity of his stomach to the sudden billowing of his cheeks. He pressed a button on his desk and the door behind him opened quickly. Mrs. Clarke, his secretary, a blue-haired, coldly efficient matron in a gaberdine suit and dark nylons, came in with an oddly incongruous scent of hyacinths. "Yes, Mr. Cooper?"

"Got some more of my tablets?" He spoke thinly through his pain.

She went to the right-hand drawer of his desk and opened it. With no expression on her face she took out a little blue bottle, shook two tablets on to his blotting-

paper and filled a glass of water. "You'll need more of them soon," she said, and left us.

Cooper flung the tablets into his mouth and swallowed a mouthful of water. "They're horrible," he said, "but I'd rather take them than diet. I get them from what's-his-name . . ." He waved his hand with naïve conceit. "The royal physician fellow. Where were we?"

"Mather."

"Yes. I was dining with Lovett a couple of nights ago. He gives a fine dinner." I listened to a description of it, a critical appraisal of the wine, hoping that my face showed sufficient respect. "Good painter too, isn't he?" said Cooper.

"He has a big reputation." I wondered why both he and Vaughan considered me an expert, but I knew that Cooper would not have allowed me to give *him* information had he considered it important. "He belongs to the old school, of course."

"The old school wasn't a bad school," said Cooper. "At least you know what it's all about. This modern stuff is rubbish. What about Mather?"

"I'm no expert," I felt compelled to explain, "but twenty or thirty years ago you could have called him a modern. But he's rather common-place now. He's been an R.A. for years, and he has the Order of Merit. He does those controversial paintings . . ."

"I know, laddie, I know. . . ." said Cooper irritably. "He was doing Pictures of the Year when I was young. He had a beard then. Now he paints a lot of angels and saints dressed up as butchers and bricklayers, and all looking as if they were made out of putty. I don't understand that sort of stuff. He's a fake."

I decided that perhaps Vaughan had been wrong, that Cooper really had spoken to Lovett. I seemed to

hear the old man's querulous, indignant voice using the same words that Cooper had spoken.

"When I went to chapel as a boy," Cooper went on, "we weren't told that angels were like butchers. Heaven was there, Hell was there." His thumb jerked conclusively at the ceiling and the floor. "Heaven was a beautiful place, it had to be for us. I've seen all this sort of thing before. Go and see Lovett, he'll tell you. Take him out to lunch." He picked up his cigar, saw that it had gone out, and lit it again. His voice came hoarsely through the thick yellow smoke. "Lovett will tell you the whole story. See if there is anything in it. But don't make it too literary."

"Shall I say you sent me?"

His head moved slowly. "Say you've heard he's got some information on Mather."

I shuffled my feet on the floor, but I had hoped for more information than this. He blew out one long plume of smoke that hung above his head like a bannerol. "Lovett has been clawing at people like Mather for as long as I can remember. That's the only side of art people are interested in, laddie. They don't want art criticism, they're only interested in artists. While you're on the story find out how much they both make a year. It might give you an angle."

"Shall I see Mather too?"

Cooper pulled himself out of his chair. He laid his fingers gently on his stomach and depressed it as he might a well-inflated balloon. Then he walked across to the window and pulled the velvet curtain so that a bar of crimson shadow fell across his desk, to which he returned, sitting down in his chair and looking out of the dusk with pain-filled eyes. He belched, slowly, painfully and gratefully.

"*Mather!*" he said through a half-strangled gasp, and then more strongly, "Mather wouldn't see you. He hasn't seen any journalist for years. But pin a pair of wings on your back, laddie, and wear a butcher's hat and fly through the window."

I laughed politely, wondering how long I could prolong my spurious amusement without appearing obsequious. Then Mrs. Clarke came in again, one hand leisurely stroking the blue-rinse of her hair. "Conference?" she said.

Cooper surrendered his body to his flatulence again and then regathered his strength. "Come in!" he shouted.

They came in, his chiefs of staff. Vaughan first, jauntily and confidently, winking at me slyly and walking across the room to stand by the window. He fitted a cigarette in a holder and lit it. After him came Eccles, the worried, womanly Assistant Editor, his waistcoat dusted with ash, his thin face set in a solemnity he thought fitting to the occasion. Then Grant, Art Editor, bored, saturnine, indifferent to a deforming hump on his back. Davies, Features Editor, a little man with a Neanderthaloid face, an Oxford grouper, but an astute journalist, and always suffering from the confused loyalties such a combination imposed.

Finally, coming late with a breathless and nervous apology, Simpson, the Sports Editor, fingering his H.A.C. tie.

They ranged themselves, seated or standing, about the room, and I wondered why I had not been dismissed. I got up from my chair, and Cooper waved the hand that held his cigar.

"I've been telling our best reporter about the Mather Story."

Eccles smiled his bitter appreciation of Cooper's

irony, but Vaughan, with a loyalty for which I mentally thanked him, said briskly, "He should be able to make a good page lead out of it, Walter."

"Perhaps," said Cooper without enthusiasm, "that's all, laddie, get down to it."

FOUR

LOVETT's house in Hamilton Terrace had been designed at the turn of the century by an architect who could see no beauty in a curve. He must have been an irritable, bitter man. The house thrust black, monstrous angles at me and lowered behind a screen of dusty laurel. It lay back from the roadway, flanked on each side by a derelict coach-house and a conservatory that was a miniature Crystal Palace. There was a litter of broken flower-pots leaning against the conservatory door, and a platoon of gin and vermouth bottles drawn up beside the coach-house. A yellow-mantled japonica guarded the driveway, and a monkey-puzzle tree writhed darkly on a patch of lawn. There was a green matting of unkempt fern hanging from two stone urns on the doorstep.

Lovett opened the door to me, and he blinked against the afternoon sun. Although I had seen him before I was not prepared for the curious contrasts in the old man's appearance, as if Throgmorton Street and *La Vie Bohème* had between them produced a comic mutation. The black coat, full black cravat with a winking pearl in its centre, soft white shirt, and striped trousers, too short for even his marionette legs, ended abruptly in a pair of ragged carpet slippers. His face was a parody of ferocity, and I felt that he had been watching me approach the house and had practised the expression for my benefit.

He tucked a thumb inside the pocket of his double-

breasted waistcoat and looked at me carefully. "Good-afternoon, young fella," he said, not unkindly, "who are you?"

I explained and left it at that. "A reporter, eh? What have I done now?"

I could see that he wanted the badinage reciprocated and I shook my head expressively and said, "*Ah!*"

"I suppose you want to come in," he said. "I'd keep you here if the outside of this damned mausoleum weren't more ugly than the inside. Come in, dammit! It's bloody cold too."

I was strangely fascinated by the unusual malleability of his face, by the unexpected power of his voice that seemed to come on some syllables only and rest at others. There was a lower-lying edge to it, a west country slur. "*Well?*" he said.

We set off down the hallway, a cream-washed corridor of gentle archways that led with simplicity to a huge convex mirror on the far wall. On its surface I saw caricatures of Lovett and myself, grotesque heads and mincing bodies. Lovett walked with jerking, excited movements that were comically parodied by his reflection in the mirror. He walked as if he were anxious to exercise all the muscles of his body at once, all except those of his left arm, the fist of which he planted firmly on his left buttock. Walking behind him I was faintly shocked to see that he had a small bald tonsure, a pink circle among that thick white hair.

We turned left at the end of the hall, into a huge room where high sash-windows looked northwards, over a garden that was all lawn and the threatening thunder of rhododendron bushes. In the centre of the lawn a Siamese cat was teasing a ball.

Canvases leant against the walls of the studio and climbed to the ceiling, Lovett's distinct canvases, the

stylised portraits, glistening still-lives, and the impeccable rain-washed landscapes for which he was famous. They flooded the cold room with the warmth of their colour. There was Lovett's happy soul and there was nothing dark or ugly in it. No darkness, no subtlety, only a childish and even gluttonous abandon to the glory of colour. I realised, suddenly and without effort, why he hated Mather's work so much.

Lovett kicked a hassock from his path with a thrust of his little leg, and he stood without any self-consciousness in the centre of his work, legs straddled, white head flung back. Both thumbs were now in his waistcoat pockets as he stared at me.

"Sit down, young fella," he said, nodding toward an imitation Regency chair. "Bought that in a film studio, it's as phony as you like. These fellas can't even make good imitations. Like some coffee? No . . . that's no good, the woman's gone shopping. Women have always gone shopping when you want them. I could make it myself . . .?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. The slender chair supported me uncertainly and thrust my back into a position of erect discomfort.

"Then we'll have some Tio Pepe." He jerked himself to attention and marched quickly to the Sheraton sideboard, pushed aside a sacrilegious jumble of palettes, paint, paper and rags. "I've some ginger-snaps," he said over his shoulder.

"Not with sherry."

"Lumme," said Lovett, "you're odd. Still, you newspapermen never eat, only drink, doncher?"

I smiled; this was not the moment to argue with him. He brought the sherry in tall, thin glasses, holding them up to the light so that each became a bulb of faint amber. "Not sherry glasses, these," he said, "still . . .

The fellas who make this are artists. There's pure colour for you. Now if you wanted to paint it, how would you go about it, eh?"

I shook my head in ignorance as I took my glass from him. He put his on the floor and set off on an awkward circumnavigation of the room, munching a biscuit and talking.

"I'll tell you how you'd paint it if you wanted to make money," he said with unexpected contempt. "You'd paint the glass with a black outline, no damned perspective, no nothing. You'd fill it with the muddiest colour you could and stick a kipper's head in the corner of the canvas. That's if your name was Dufy, or Modigliani, or Minton, or Mather." The alliteration seemed to please him.

"About Mather . . ." I said.

He forced another biscuit into his mouth, crunching it enthusiastically. "What about Mather?" He suddenly laughed, a high-pitched guffaw, and the sherry he had just picked from the floor spilled over his fingers. He licked them like a schoolboy.

"You were there, I suppose? The place was lousy with the Press. I suppose you were there when the fella walked out?" I nodded my head. "God! you fellas are a disgrace. That's the sort of thing you're interested in. For forty years I've been trying to drive sense into every editor I've met. Get a man who understands art, I say. Get him to write about it, I say. Your ordinary bloke in the street knows more about the subject than some of these fellas who are writing about it. Anything that's different. They paint a donkey's arse on a bit of board and make a fortune."

The unexpected coarseness tripped from his lips without apology. I expected him to recover himself and ask me not to quote him, but he went on, his voice

bubbling with the force of his words. "You fellas aren't interested in art any more, only artists."

"That's what my editor says," I said, almost in apology for Cooper.

He grinned. "I know. It's what he told me."

He strode off to the great window and stared up at the sky, a strange little man, suddenly sad, with a glass of sherry held dejectedly in his hands. Then the muscles of his face, unnaturally still, moved to life again. He grinned and grimaced, rubbed the side of his nose with his forefinger.

"You wouldn't go out of your way to hear my opinion of Mather's work, you wouldn't print a damn line of it if I weren't such a comic." He looked at me and I could see that he knew this was so and he could not understand it. "That's another thing your editor told me. God, haven't you fellas any sense of proportion? We've got to be a comic before you take any notice. If you fellas had a Constable stuck under your noses you wouldn't know it from a Canaletto."

It had all happened before, so many times that I had lost count. In a thousand chairs and a thousand rooms I had sat patiently and listened to other people's views of the Press. Everybody knows what is wrong with it. At last I said, "Well, I'm here now, Mr. Lovett. This is your opportunity to change things." And I smiled resignedly as I said it.

He put his glass on the floor, bending over in one movement and then jerking upright again. He chuckled. "Have a ginger-snap? No? Well, I'm going to have another one." He came back from the sideboard, munching noisily. Between satisfied smacks of his lips, and a quick and efficient working of his tongue about his teeth, he said, "You fellas think I'm a fool, doncher? You think I don't know why you came up here. With

what I know I could have had the whole of Fleet Street here, walking all over my house and asking damn-fool questions and taking down damn-fool answers I never made. But I don't want the Press for that. That's not the sort of thing the Press should be saying about Art, or artists. Why should I talk to you?" He was not smiling now, and the soft outlines of his face had hardened.

"No reason at all, Mr. Lovett, I'll go if you wish." I made a pretence of feeling under the chair for my hat, and he watched me, as if he were challenging me to pick it up. Then he smiled and I left my hat where it was.

"Come over here, my boy, and I'll show you what I mean." I joined him by the bookcase, standing close to his tiny figure while he brushed the back of his hand along a shelf. "Sketchbooks," he said, "there's over fifty years' work there. Night and day I sketch, always working, always doing something. Teaching myself, even at my age. Now you wouldn't believe that unless I told you, would you? I make a hundred sketches for one landscape maybe, two or three hundred for one portrait. When I do a portrait of some fat trollop I keep myself awake at night stripping the flesh from her face to find the bone. It's the bone that's important, the bone underneath, young fella! And life's like that too, there's too much loose flesh on it these days."

He walked to the centre of the room again as he talked. His restless wandering was disconcerting. "I get up in the morning and work. Up with the sun, the days are too short anyway. That's painting. *Work!*" He spat the word at me. The comic grimace was replaced by an expression close to pain. "You work, and there are days when you realise that you haven't got it in you any more. But you go on working, you go on working, dammit, though it hurts!"

I felt a warm liking for him, and there was nothing I could say that would tell him this. What expression there was in my face I do not know, but when Lovett saw it he said with sudden harshness, "You don't understand!"

"Perhaps not, Mr. Lovett. My profession's a craft, not an art."

He shook my arm kindly. "Thank God for your honesty, anyway, boy. You're the first journalist I've met who didn't think he's got the answer to everything." He pleaded with me naively. "But why not write like that? Why don't you tell people that artists have to work like niggers if they're to be of any value? It takes years to make a surgeon, or even a plumber, but any neophyte with a palette knife can knock off something in half a morning and spend the rest of the day listening to other fools telling him what a genius he is."

He threw up his hands before his face in exasperation. "Everybody paints now. Politicians, generals, motion picture actors, they all paint. They all turn up at Burlington House." He grinned at me and then he was away again, walking up and down the long studio until at last he stopped by the window. He beckoned me.

"How long would it take you to paint that damn animal?" I looked down at the cream-and-chocolate Siamese rolling on the grass. "Half an hour? A bit of yellow, eh? A splash of green and we've got 'Cat at play', or 'Portrait of the artist's wife disrobing before decapitated shrimps'. Eh? Eh?"

He thrust a finger into my ribs and I laughed for him.

"It can't be painted," he said. "Nothing can be painted as it should be. I've spent fifty years trying and sometimes I'm ashamed of my effrontery at trying to compete with the Almighty."

He swung round on me with such ferocity that I

stepped back involuntarily. He clutched my arm to restrain me. "There's no short cut, there's nothing that doesn't demand hard work."

I was confused, wondering where all this was to lead. I had listened to him, and played a recipient's rôle to his exhortations, but I was wondering where the story could be. And I was made uneasy by the injured, bewildered child that was behind the buffoon.

"You think Mather feels this?" It was as if I had touched a button. His eyes grew bright and angry, and yet he seemed to be burlesquing his own anger as he unconsciously withdrew another biscuit from his pocket and thrust it into his mouth.

"So we're back on Mather," he said, swallowing. "And I thought you wanted to hear some common sense. I thought something was wrong, you've not been taking notes. What's the matter, don't you know shorthand?" I nodded and smiled.

"Oh, Mather can paint." He whirled his body in a little pirouette of disgust. "He tries hard. He has skill somewhere. He could paint like Watts if he wanted to, the man's like that. Like Turner, he's got half a dozen styles up his sleeve, the damned conjuror. But he's a hypocrite, and he daubs because the fools want daubs."

He kicked angrily at a hassock. "Somebody told him he should paint people like plum-puddings, angels like butchers, and that perspective was out of fashion." I heard an echo of Cooper's voice. "And then, God help us, the Church decides that Mather is the greatest painter alive. You know his work? What do you think of it?"

I was able to tell the truth diplomatically. "I don't like it."

"Have another sherry?"

He came back from the sideboard with the decanter

still in his hand, waving it to emphasise his words. "Thirty years ago I wrote an article for one of these damned glossy magazines. Gave the so-called moderns everything I'd got. First they wouldn't publish it, said it was libellous, by God! When they made me change it and they published it, what did they do then? Filled the next bloody issue with complaints and sneers from the Bond Street boys. I was an old-fashioned curmudgeon, they said. What about Matisse, they said, what about Gauguin and Pissarro and Van Gogh? Well, what about them? I said. Wrote another article and I said, publish it if you've got the guts. Publish or be damned. But the editor wouldn't, and he's dead now, and damned too, I've no doubt, poor fella."

He sat down suddenly in the chair, his cheeks grey and his lips moving gently with soundless words. He had changed to a very old and a very tired man, confused by the violence of his emotions. He looked so pathetic that I was forced to restrain an impulse to pat his shoulder. Suddenly, newly flushed with life, he jumped out of the chair.

"Do you know why Rembrandt starved? Because he would paint the truth. And who'll buy the truth? Do people read your rag for the truth? Eh?"

But I was not to be trapped into a discussion of the Press. I shrugged my shoulders. I was growing impatient, the old man's anger and pain lay between me and a story I did not yet understand.

"Mr. Lovett, we understand that you are about to make some public statement on Lionel Mather and his work." It was the best I could do with the little information I had.

His tired eyes studied me dispassionately. "You've not cared a damn about what I was saying. I thought you were different."

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Lovett. I am two personalities. One of them has been deeply interested in what you have been saying; the other, you must understand, is a working journalist."

"I know . . ." he said unhappily, and rubbed his hands up and down his buttocks, rocking slowly on his heels. Then, without looking at me, and with his voice hoarse, he said, "If that's all you want you can go off again. If it's muck-raking you're interested in go and try some of these Bond Street boys. I'm not saying a word to the Press about it . . . not yet."

There was the story before me. "Mr. Lovett . . ."

I had been too eager. "*Go to hell, will you?*" he shouted at me.

By the gate, as I left, the golden japonica brushed my coat with dying blossom. This was not the first time a door had been closed in my face. Like any newspaperman I had often experienced it. I knew that when I told him, Vaughan would laugh and send me back again.

But not for many years, not since I was a boy on a provincial paper, had words like Lovett's struck inside my guard and hurt me. I did not know why.

FIVE

“TRY him again to-morrow,” Vaughan said, “you’ve got to get it, John. The editor’s interested in this story. How about going up there to-night? He may have changed his mind, you never know.”

“No,” I said, “I’ll try it to-morrow.”

I did not go home that evening, not immediately. There are men whose passage home after a day’s work is a sigh of relief, a gust of thankfulness carrying them to some dormitory refuge. You can see them at the suburban termini, brisk, determined men who know that all’s well with their world.

I go home circuitously, I approach my private life in a sidelong fashion as if I am ashamed to admit, even to myself, that it exists. And yet all day I am conscious of it, conscious of the fact that my mother awaits me, storing up the little thoughts that have occurred to her that day, marshalling her memories for my inspection. I am a man who spends his evenings in his boyhood.

So I go home by way of the Press Club, where a newspaperman may drink his valediction to the day.

I found Chris Carter in the bar, sitting below the large Phil May sketch that leers at us while we drink. The bleary-eyed, inebriated face in the cartoon sharply contrasted Carter’s studied boredom. He was a thin man, with a long and narrow neck to support his head. He was, I suppose, five or six years younger than I, but he

had such an expression of maturity that there were times when he looked more like an elderly don.

Our friendship had been a casual accident at the beginning. We met when we were both sent to Milford Haven; there had been a trawler missing. We kept the long watch of a winter's night on the quay, and since men seem to talk freely about themselves when darkness hides their faces we knew each other intimately by dawn. Men meet like this; for a time their minds run in phase and there is a promise of mutual trust. The moment goes, they move away from each other, and yet keep alive the semblance of friendship as if in memory of that one moment.

Perhaps this is too strained an explanation. It may simply be that I was still a reporter, and Carter had moved on. His agile brain and sharply defined opportunism had carried him up a slender ladder into The Reader's favour. He was a clever man, and his true cleverness lay in understanding his weaknesses and giving way to them, even making virtues of them. He wrote leaders for The Reader, he stood behind the old man's political shoulder, and it was said that one day he would be an editor.

He saw me and raised a hand. His immaculate carelessness and self-control had a peculiar effect on me always. They forced me, as it were, to slouch both physically and mentally.

He pushed a chair toward me with his foot and smiled. "Hello, John. Sean's at the bar. He's bringing you a pint."

I looked for Sean Conlon with pleasure and saw him grinning at me, a polished, broad face that seemed to take up all of his head and leave little room for his thick hair. He came back from the bar with beer dripping over his fingers. "Blessings on your house!" he shouted, mocking his own vernacular.

"And on yours," I said in the same manner. "And how's himself this evening?"

"Ach, himself is fine."

"There was once an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scot," said Carter. "We're like a music-hall joke." He raised his glass. "Death to the counter-revolution."

"Bad cess to the Pope," I said with a smile at Sean.

"And to hell with all black-hearted Orangemen!"

We drank, we looked about the bar, and then we looked at one another and smiled. I was pleased by their company and felt that confidence and assurance a man always feels in the presence of his friends. I looked approvingly at the bar with its heavy central beam, the L-shaped counter, the kegs decorously draped with oil-cloth, and George the barman busy with glasses. There was a drowsy whirr of conversation, the smell of beer and cigarette smoke, the noise of the balls clicking in the billiard-room beyond. It was a masculine enclave, firmly based, immutable. On the wall of the little room the highly coloured cartoons of Fleet Street's great smiled down at me with bland approval. They seemed to be telling me that if I behaved myself I might join them one day.

"Now we've had our little joke," said Carter, "shall we become adults?"

Sean pushed at his hair impatiently. He was an untidy man, the button of his collar was missing and his tie retreated from it. His tweed jacket was burnt on the pocket flaps, his trousers were shapeless and soiled. He had not shaved that morning. He was the antithesis of Carter, physically, sartorially and temperamentally.

"See who wants to grow up," his voice shouted. "Did you read that infantile column of his this morning, John?"

"I did. There were three solecisms, two *non sequiturs*,

a downright falsehood, and a totally irrelevant conclusion." We laughed and Carter shrugged his shoulders.

Sean enjoyed baiting him, and I think Carter enjoyed it too, for he pushed out his lower lip and held his head to one side, which was always an indication of inner amusement. Sean pulled at his waistband with one hand and winked at me. "We know you have the gift of tongues, Chris, but why the devil do you have to believe what you write?"

"He has troubles, Sean," I said, "he worries about conjunctions. He thinks that perhaps they ought to be abolished along with the Liberal Party. Why not write a column without them, Chris? Or maybe one with sentences of less than eight words."

"None of my sentences have more than six words," said Carter gravely.

"*For why have the Socialists failed the nation?*" quoted Sean, "That's eight."

Carter ignored us. "Do you like my new shirt?" he said.

"I thought it was a pyjama jacket." I was always compelled to attack his complacency with such boyish sarcasm.

"You dress like a sack, John." He pushed his tongue against his cheek and stared at my wrists. "You look as if you wear out your clothes to spite them."

"If I earned twenty-five hundred a year," I said with more warmth than I intended, "I could dress like you."

"It's two thousand," he corrected me, "and you could earn it too, if you were as unprincipled as I am."

"You're the most unprincipled man of principle I know," boomed Sean. He dropped a hand on Carter's arm with a gesture of affection. "But I'm agreeing with everything you say, haven't you got The Reader's ear?"

"An Irish Catholic and a Scots Presbyterian!" said

Carter with disgust. "What company for a rationalist to keep."

"D'y'know any more impartial?" said Sean, licking beer from his thumb. "Most of us do a good job without worrying, but you, Chris Carter, you worry yourself so much about the ethics of it all that you end by being the most unethical. You're the worst kind of cynic, you're ashamed of being one."

"Our bog-trotting philosopher," said Carter, smiling pleasantly.

Sean put his beer glass on the table and pushed a fist into his palm. "Look. I'm forty-three. I've been a journalist for twenty-five years . . ."

"Newspaperman," corrected Carter gravely.

"Newspaperman, journalist, to hell!" exploded Sean. "I was happiest when I was a young reporter (or would y'like it news-gatherer) in Belfast, living on soda-bread and dreams. Having a crack in the pubs and singing bawdy songs. Believing in Wolfe Tone and Mick Collins and the perfidy of Englishmen like you. The only honest journalists are the Irish, Protestant and Papist."

"Leave him alone, Sean," I laughed, "or we'll soon be telling each other what a terrible place Fleet Street is."

"And isn't it, though?"

"No it isn't, you drunken Irish fire-brain."

"More beer," said Carter, and we laughed and drank again. We drank, and we softened our spirits with it. Carter lit himself a cigar while Sean and I jeered at him for the affectation. He studied the end of it and blew a plume of smoke at the Phil May cartoon.

"There's something wrong with the three of us," he said slowly, "most men in this profession aren't so damned self-analytical. This is what comes of making friends with people in fear of God and the Devil."

"Be assured about my conscience," I smiled at

him. "If there were any risk of it worrying me I might be in your income bracket. As it is I haven't even got an ulcer."

"And nor have I," said Sean with a drunken flourish of his hand. "To hell with the readers, and to hell with pious mumblings about the dignity of the Fourth Estate. It's a job to me, eight hours a day on the sub's desk. Long ago I gave up worrying about it. It was easier in Belfast. You were either an Orangeman or a Papist. There was no other quarrel, and you knew where your side stood. But what are you here? I quote: Socialist, Liberal, Conservative, Communist, Atheist, Agnostic, Episcopalian, Methodist . . ."

"Unquote," I said, "those are the owner's business. Ours is the facts."

"That sounds like Cooper," Carter smiled at me ironically.

"Cooper's a lickspittle." Sean bounced nervously in his chair.

"He's a fine newspaperman," I said.

"What the hell does that mean?" Carter sat up suddenly and stared about the bar. I could see that the conversation was beginning to bore him.

"Have another drink, Chris," I said, "Cooper's manners may be those of a pig, but he has a genius for running a newspaper."

"Correct!" said Sean with a comic jerk of his hands. "Who else would think of making a page one story out of the fact that the dear, darling baby prince of the English can now say 'airplane'?"

"That's funny to you and to me," I said, "but it's what the readers want."

"We're talking shop," Carter yawned.

"The world's business is our business," said Sean sententiously, "so how can it be shop?"

We wrangled, we taunted each other, and we drank too much. I was now ready to go home, ready to face my mother. We began to talk seriously, carried beyond the bantering, verbal horse-play of early drinking to an adult gravity. While Sean sat silently, watching the table with a blinking smile, I talked to Carter of his family, his cold reflective wife, who had the features of a Goya portrait and the ruthless temperament of a Calvinist. I asked, with sentimental curiosity, about their daughter, a faery-like creature who had once sat all afternoon on my knee, her moist hand clutching mine. When I mentioned her name Carter's face became suddenly wistful.

"She's fine," he said. "She's fine."

Then Sean, turning his empty glass in his hands and shaking his head at my offer to fill it, said, "Why don't you write another book, Chris?"

Carter looked at him coldly. There was an exasperating neatness in the structure of his face, the thin nose and widely spaced eyes. "Why should I?" he said, and Sean did not reply.

Carter sensed that he had hurt Conlon. He leant forward suddenly, as if to take Sean's hand, and then he relaxed his body again. "To write well you must be honest with yourself." He began to speak slowly, searching for words. "All my working-life I am being consciously dishonest. It does not trouble me deeply, but I know that what I am writing for The Reader is one side of the picture only, its truth is that relative. I am able to do this because I have persuaded myself that I am doing nobody any harm. But it breeds a contempt for one's own talent."

"No," I said, "you're wrong."

He smiled at me. "I'm talking of myself, John. You have your own problems."

"I've no problems." I corrected myself, "Not professionally, anyway. I like my job."

"Damn your consciences!" Sean broke in upon our unspoken thoughts. "Let's argue about something else. Shall we discuss the dogma of the Assumption, now? Or . . ." he added regretfully, seeing the expression on our faces, ". . . shall we have one for the road?"

Carter and I looked at each other and grinned. "One for the road," we said, and Carter added, "There are too many dogmas of assumption."

★ ★ ★

The lamp in the hall was alight when I arrived home, a thin glow surrounded by a jingling Japanese windmill that was the sort of trivial, childish thing that my mother liked. As I closed the door the draught made the slivers of glass ring against each other hysterically. Bran came sleepily from the kitchen, his wet jaws yawning, a hybrid dog, an old black and white hearth-rug with torn ears and a rump that flopped in maudlin welcome. He whined and I bent down and hammered his flanks.

I had made too much noise, but I hoped that my mother was not awake. I walked through the flat, my hands in my pockets, and my lips pursed in a silent whistle. The feeling of confidence and well-being that had filled me in the Press Club had been curiously neutralised the moment I entered the door.

This, I decided with heavy humour, was not a home but a repository for my mother's furniture. The gaunt, empty cupboards, which she stubbornly refused to discard, leant against the walls like bored loungers. The spaces between them were filled with calendars, burnt leather work, cheap miniatures, and poor prints of Highland scenes.

I went into the kitchen. There was a plate of sand-

wiches and a glass of milk on the table, the edges of the bread curling. I was not hungry, but I ate rather than excite my mother's querulous disappointment. Bran sat beside my feet and leant his body against my calves.

"*John!* Is that you, John?"

I sighed, stubbed out a cigarette, and went into her room. She was sitting up in her great bed with a cashmere shawl about her shoulders, and as I saw her I thought that for all the years I could remember I had seen her thus, no younger, no older, a doll-like woman with white hair, sitting in bed with a cashmere shawl about her shoulders.

I kissed her cheek and she said, as she said every Tuesday evening. "You wore the tie to-day. That was nice of you, Johnny."

I could not remember a time when my mother had not been an invalid. She had dominated our family by her ill-health. It had been a barometer of our happiness, never reading *Set Fair*. When I was young my boisterous spirits had been so often checked by warnings that Mother had been worse that day, or showed no improvement, that even now I approached her softly, a little boy coming in to say good-night.

Her illness was indefinable. Her body, once weakened by the violent paroxysm that brought my sister into the world, from thereon lost interest in recovery. Yet within that physical frame which was so reluctant to exert itself she nursed a steel-strong spirit of selfishness. It enabled her to go on living, to move about the flat for a few hours during the day, sometimes to walk cautiously in the sunlight of the square below. But always she was drawn back to her bed, to that comforting fortress from which she surveyed the darkness of a troubled world in which she played no part.

The bedside light dropped a pink glow over her face

and painted it against the dark, carved headboard of the bed, a triangular chin sharp with obstinacy, cheekbones with etiolated flesh, white hair, and hurt, uncertain eyes.

Before I could withdraw from my kiss she raised her hand and laid the bones of her fingers along my jaw.

"I thought you would have been asleep, Mother."

"I waited up for my boy. I wanted to talk to him."

When she was angry with me she always spoke as if I were a third person, whose filial disloyalty we should both deplore. Her nebulous anger had no beginning or end.

"You leave me alone. It's so lonely, so lonely." And then her voice brightened, and her hands fluttered up from the shawl in girlish excitement. "Pull up that little stool, the one you always sat on when you were a boy. Remember, Johnny?"

I remembered. In my own home I was always remembering, not the boyhood I had experienced but the one she imagined for me. In the heavy wardrobe, dark in the corner of her room, were still some of the clothes I had once worn. She jealously hoarded them, and wept over them too, I suspected. All of the furniture in the flat was kept for the same reason, to sustain her bloodless memories. But for me they blocked out all healthy emotions as completely as the lace curtains over her window kept out the sun.

I sat on the stool, with my knees bent beneath my chin, and she smiled at me. I was glad to please her.

"Now tell me everything you've done to-day. Everybody you saw, and what they said, and whether they praised my son."

My mind was sterile. I could think of nothing to tell her that she would understand. I felt that she had asked

me the question as if I were a traveller returned from Cathay. \

"It was a dull day, Mother. I saw Conlon and Carter this evening."

"How nice for you. Of course, I see now why you are so late." She said this with resentment rather than understanding. "Is Conlon that nice Irish boy?"

"He's hardly a boy, Mother." Conlon had come to dinner long ago, and, with that sudden, spontaneous charm he could sometimes find within himself, had delighted my mother by his singing of *The Bould Fenian Men*. "He's almost middle-aged, his hair is grey."

"Well, he seems so cheerful and happy that he must be young. And remember, John, my hair was white when I was very young." Her hand went uncertainly to her temple and remained there, resting on the hair that fell over her ear.

"I remember I was quite upset by it at first, my son. And then I didn't worry, even when you came in one day and asked me if I should be called grandmam now that my hair was white. We had such fun in the old Highland house, didn't we?"

"It's long ago now, Mother." For twenty-five years we had lived in flats like this, always with the furniture waiting impatiently to be moved again. From that point of view it was a long time since we had left the Highland house, yet my father's death, which had been the reason for our moving, sometimes seemed to have occurred only yesterday.

"I'm sure you're mistaken, my son. It wasn't long ago. You're still very young, you know." I smiled and shook my head. "Well, never mind. When I'm dead you'll marry a nice girl and have a home and children of your own, like Mary," she added a little bitterly. She looked at me shrewdly. "Have you been out with some

nice girl to-night? You must bring her to dinner one evening. You must bring her to see your ~~old~~ invalid mother. You mustn't hide me away, you know."

"Mother," I said, and I looked at my hands because I could not say this while looking at her eyes, "don't you think you'd be happier if you went down to Guildford and stayed with Mary?"

She was displeased; I could tell that without looking at her face. I could tell by the fact that she did not answer immediately, and because the rhythm of her breathing had quickened. Then she said angrily, "*You've been talking to Mary!*"

"No, Mother."

She depressed the lamp-shade so that her face could not be seen in the shadow. She retreated into the dusk the better to strike at me, and the light fell between us on the blue coverlet. "I know you want to get rid of me, John, that's why you want your sister to take me. You think I'm a burden, especially now you've met this girl. Goodness knows what sort of person she is to want you to get rid of your old mother."

"There isn't a girl, Mother."

She leant forward into the light, and her hair fell across her face. I felt a bitter and regretful pity for her. She was suddenly thin and aged, and I wanted to go back, both of us to go back to that mythical past in which she believed.

"I'm hindering you in your work. I know it, that's it, I'm hindering you. I never thought my children would consider me a burden."

"It's not that, Mother," I said patiently, "but this seems no life for either of us." I looked about the dusk of her room expressively, the lace curtains bowing across the window, the black furniture jostling us with

their oppressive memories. Outside the door Bran scratched gently and whined.

"Mary doesn't want me. You know she doesn't want me. It's dreadful to grow old and weak. You'll find that out!" she said with a touch of malice.

"I'm sure she wants to have you," I lied. Inwardly I cursed my sister, her completeness within her own family unit, her brawling, healthy brood of children, the vicarage in which she lived, and Malcolm, her husband, tolerant, so tolerant that his sense of values was wasting away.

"Get me a glass of water, John, and my tablets."

As I walked into the hall the telephone rang. I picked it up and heard the operator at the Cloisters. "Man called Lovett ringing you, Mr. Ramsay. I tried the Press Club and they said you'd gone."

"Thanks. Can you put him through to here?"

"We aren't supposed to, Mr. Ramsay, but here you are." The diaphragm cracked and spluttered in my ear, and then I heard Lovett's voice shouting. "Hallo! *Hallo!* Damn the thing!"

"Hallo, Mr. Lovett. John Ramsay."

"Thank God! You the fella who came to see me to-day? Why'd you go off like that?"

I grinned. "You told me to go to hell, Mr. Lovett. It's a bit early for that, so I went back to my paper."

He cackled his approval. "Damned sensitive, aren't you? I thought you fellas were used to me. Come and see me to-morrow morning, and we'll have a talk."

I put down the telephone with pleasure, studied it for a moment, and then dialled Vaughan's number at his home. His voice answered sleepily, and I could hear music in the background.

"John? Hang on a minute until I turn down the radio. Now what is it?"

"Lovett. He wants to see me in the morning. I'll be in late."

"What's the story?"

"How the hell do I know? You sent me on it."

"So I did. Well, stick to it, John. We're short of good stories this week."

When I returned to the bedroom, with a glass of water and my mother's tablets, she was hastily thrusting her lipstick beneath her pillow. She took the water and the medicine and looked at me, narrowing her eyes. "Who was that on the phone? It was Mary."

"It was the office, Mother."

"No," she said wearily, "it was Mary. I know. I couldn't leave, John. She has nowhere to put my furniture in that little house of hers, and, after all, our furniture is all that's left of our home, isn't it? It has so many happy memories for us." From somewhere inside her body her voice found a brittle strength. "The stool you were sitting on, sit down on it again, Johnny. That stool, and the hatstand, and my wardrobe, and my dressing-table, almost everything came from the Highland house. And this bed which is so enormous was taken to the Highland house when they built it in the eighteenth century. Do you know, Johnny, Jacobite prisoners built the house?"

I knew, but I shook my head.

"It always made me feel so sorry for it, because some of the prisoners were perhaps Appin men, my own people, and yours too, John. It was such a wrench to leave Kinlochleven." She looked at me evenly. "I don't think I could go through another move, after so many all these years. Get rid of these things I love. Do you remember that great painting of *Loch nan Uamh*? Your father loved it so, and when we had to sell it at the auction because it was so large, then I thought I would die."

I had stood in the hall of the Highland house on the afternoon of that auction, scarcely understanding what was happening, and still in grief for the death of my father. I saw the dealer who bought the painting rip the canvas from the frame and take the latter away. When he had gone I took the painting to the garden and burnt it so that my mother might never know how worthless it had been considered.

She saw my frown and pulled her hands from beneath the shawl and held them out. I took them, saddened. "You're restless, my son. You're like your father. It's your job, it's that hateful work."

"You are always mistaken about that, Mother. I don't hate it, I like it."

"But you do hate it, my boy, you do. I know you're being obstinate just because of the money." She had begun to cry. "It would have been so nice if you could have stayed on in the Army, perhaps changed your commission into a Highland regiment."

"I didn't like the Army, Mother."

She looked at me through angry tears. "Of course you did! My people were Stewarts, John, Appin Stewarts. Royal's our race you know! They were all in the Army. It's your father, he always laughed at it, and you listened to him. You always listened to him. He had you all to himself!"

My father's life had been subordinated to my mother's illness. His self-sacrifice and uncomplaining devotion hurt me, even as a boy. I remember one terrifying night when I ran away from his Christian humility and my mother's domination. I ran away from medicine bottles and thermometers, and morning prayers, and I slept one wild night in the open in Glencoe. As I remembered, I sat motionless, her hand lying in mine.

I stood up at last and kissed her forehead; "Good night, Mother."

"My *dear!*" she said. I heard her voice as I closed the door, faint, drifting. "In a nice Highland regiment. The Camerons perhaps. The Camerons were kinsfolk to the Appin men. The uniform would fit you so wonderfully. Couldn't you have bought a commission in the Camerons, John. . . .?"

I pushed open the door again. "You can't buy a commission now, Mother. Now, please go to sleep."

"I'm sure that's not quite right, John."

"Perhaps so, Mother. Good-night."

I found a bottle of sherry behind the pots of marmalade and chaos of tins in the kitchen cupboard. I sat in the darkness of the drawing-room, drinking it; in the darkness because I did not wish to see my mother's furniture leering its triumph at me.

I drank so much that it was not surprising that when I went finally to bed I dreamt of Lovett and Mather. They were hacking at the painting of *Loch nan Uamh*, and gleefully dragging it into the garden of the Highland house.

SIX

WHEN I awoke I lay secure in the warmth of my bed, smoking, and watching the rain with disapproval. Beyond my window, in the garden of the square, a great plane tree was hunched in a cloak of wet branches. When I grew bored with its wretchedness I bent over the edge of my bed and picked up the copy of *Time* that lay on the floor. It was obligatory reading for the staff of the *Sunday Standard*, but on that morning I could read only the correspondence, wondering what it was that drove people to write to the Press.

I was surprised when my mother came into the room, dressed in her extravagant, purple dressing-gown, walking slowly behind a tea-trolley on which two cups chattered excitedly. I sat up and stared at her, at a frail old lady. "Mother, what the devil are you doing up? Eleven's your time."

"I wanted to bring you morning tea, just for once." And then, "Why do you smoke in bed, it's so ungentlemanly?"

"It's not a gentlemanly morning. Look at it."

"It's miserable." She moved slowly across to the window, and drew the net curtains together so that I could no longer see the tree. "London rain is never like Highland rain. At home the rain is like gauze, and when it's gone there are such brilliant colours. Perhaps it's because houses are not like the hillside."

"Perhaps," I said, in no mood to contemplate the Highlands on such a morning. She seemed determined

to be young, and a little silly, fussing about my room, picking up the magazines and gossiping inconsequentially. But I realised that I liked having her there, and I was only half serious when I said, "You go back to bed. Don't ever do this again."

"I like doing it," she said, and then spoilt the impression she had created. "Besides, it will show you how useful I can be and you won't want to get rid of me by sending me to Mary."

"I don't want to get rid of you, Mother. It's just that I think it would be best for you." I was angry and disappointed, and when she sat on my bed, and childishly pushed her knuckles against her eyes, I got up reluctantly and led her back to her room. I helped her beneath the blankets as tenderly as I could, stroking her hair until she fell asleep, or pretended to fall asleep.

Then I shuffled about the flat discontentedly. We lived on the fourth floor of a square of terraced houses, and I stared from the kitchen window to an ugly and obscene view, a shameless exposure of exterior plumbing, wet washing-lines and weeping bricks. I suddenly realised how unbearable this must be for my mother, how much a relentless prison, and for a moment I too had a bitter and unreasonable longing for Lochaber.

Bran's tail thumped a languid good-morning to me when I went into the hall. I put my foot on his belly and rolled him over, and he leered at me and yawned. I took the telephone from its stand in the hall and went into the drawing-room, shutting the door on the wire. I dialled the operator and asked hoarsely for my sister's number. It was Malcolm who answered, briskly and good-humouredly.

"Good-morning, John. How splendid to hear from you again! How is Mother?"

It entered my mind to remark that since he seemed to have accepted his wife's mother as his own it would be fitting for him now to accept some of the responsibility for her. But I parried the question and asked for Mary. When she came to the phone she was distracted and impatient. From her voice I could picture her, her untidy, too-large house, the washing that was always hanging from a drier in the scullery, the furniture always in need of dusting, the shopping-lists pinned to the woodwork above the sink, and children's muddy footmarks in the hallway. The martyrdom in her voice spoke for all housewives.

"What a dreadful time to ring up." One of my nephews was banging a tin in the background and Mary raised her voice to compete with it. "It's half-past eight. I thought all journalists got up at ten."

"I thought all housewives rose at the crack of dawn."

"Well, it didn't crack open here, it just dripped open soggily. Can't you speak up, must you whisper?" I could imagine her pushing angrily at a wisp of dark hair that always fell across her forehead when she became impatient.

"I don't want Mother to hear me."

"Oh, dear! Is it about Mother again?" She was silent, and I knew she was preparing arguments to oppose any suggestion I made.

"Look, Mary. I know we've been over this before, and I appreciate your point of view . . ."

"I'm quite sure you don't, Johnny . . ."

"All right, then, I don't. But the situation here is quite intolerable. Can't you possibly persuade Mother to come down to you? She'd be much happier."

"Wherever Mother is she'll be unhappy. Being unhappy is the only pleasure people like her get."

"It's too early for paradoxes, Mary." I thought I

heard her giggle and it encouraged me. "Now if she could come for a while . . ."

"Look here, Johnny, all through the war we looked after her while . . ."

"... while I was away enjoying myself in the Army?"

"You said it, darling, I didn't."

"All right, so I said it." We bickered foolishly as we had done when we were children, and I could not resist malice. "You're taking a fine Christian attitude for a parson's missus. How's that picce go in the Good Book, 'Honour thy Father and Mother . . . '?"

"There's no need to be vulgar, Johnny."

"For God's sake stop calling me Johnny."

"You persuade Mother to go into a nursing home or something. There *are* places, you know."

"How the devil can I afford that?"

She sighed. "You earn twice as much as Malcolm, and you've none of our responsibilities. Don't be so silly."

"Well, if it's money that worries you," I almost shouted, "I'll pay you for her keep. Then you can put a Board Residence sign outside that depressing vicarage. You could take in lodgers. It might be one way Malcolm could get people into that mock-Gothic temple of his." I heard her hand placed over the mouthpiece, the muffled sound of whispering, and then Malcolm's voice, a little too jovial, a little too tolerant as usual.

"Hello, John? Things a bit worrying up there, eh?"

"It's nothing, Malcolm." I did not wish to discuss it with him. "How'd the sermon go on Sunday, did you get a full house?"

"Eh? Oh, well, I think. Yes, very well indeed, thank you, John. I took my text from Corinthians . . . *Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?*"

"He h^hth indeed. Tell Mary I'm sorry I lost my temper. I should never make important telephone calls so early in the morning." As I replaced the receiver I heard the rustle of my mother's footsteps in the hall, and I knew that she had been listening.

* * *

The rain passed, and I walked up Hamilton Terrace with my raincoat slung across my shoulder, thinking what a fortunate fellow I was to have a job that let me walk in the Spring sunlight and talk with the famous of the world. Four million silent readers walked behind me, and not one of them cared a damn about Art. Their philistinism made me a devilish fellow.

I found fresh pleasure in the high, grey houses, the wide belly-curve of the road and the flowers dusting the window-boxes with pink, and gold, and blue. The villas of Maida Vale sat smugly behind their yellow doors. The curtains in the windows were clean, the privet hedges neatly trimmed. To look at them you would never have believed that there were dirty, mean streets in the Gorbals, or that a million Chinese were dying that moment of malnutrition and consumption. To live warmly and comfortably makes it easy to dispense with a conscience.

My own was certainly not troubling me, except that perhaps the knowledge that my mother had overheard my conversation with Mary was an irritating rash on the surface of my complacency. But so beautiful had the morning become, and so confident did I feel, that even this was of small consequence.

The fallen flowers of the japonica in the drive of Lovett's house were thick on the gravel. Water still dripped rhythmically from the grotesque black paws of the monkey-puzzle. I thought of the four million readers

silently following me, their faces agape with animal curiosity, and I thought what the hell did it matter whether they read the truth or not. They wanted sensations, not the truth, and if they were offered the truth, if there were anyone in Fleet Street superhuman enough to discover it, then nobody would buy the paper.

The door of the house was opened by a woman, a grey-haired, patient woman in a white overall. She spoke to me in a voice thick with Balkan consonants, and she stared with eyes that were in reality looking inward to every ghetto that the world has seen since the death of Christ. She had the resigned, unhappy expression of most refugees. I saw in her less a human being than an illumination of a side of Lovett's character that received no publicity. For all his ridiculous buffoonery he was, I realised, after all just the man who would employ a Jewish refugee as housekeeper.

She showed me into the studio and left me there, and as she went the stiff starch of her white apron rustled petulantly.

A dirty, paint-stained cloth hung untidily across a canvas on the easel. There were papers on the floor, a copy of the *Manchester Guardian*, that untiring conscience of my profession, its leader page mutilated by scissors. By the north window there was a small coffee-table, the ragged hassock, and the uncomfortable chair on which I had sat the day before. I felt the coffee-pot; it was hot.

I walked to the window and looked beyond the black railing to the lawn and the dark bushes. Lovett was there below, in his shirt-sleeves, chamois gloves on his hands, prodding with little enthusiasm at the earth of the borders. The Siamese cat lay on its back behind him and pawed at its tail.

The woman walked across the lawn toward Lovett,

her heavy body moving with a cumbrous and slow dignity. He looked up to her and smiled, a gentle, compassionate smile, and then he stared up at the studio window. He grinned amiably to me and began to trot toward the house. I heard his high-pitched voice coming up the stairs, and then he jerked boyishly into the room, pulling off the gloves and struggling into his jacket. His feet were restless, pointing first this way and then that, like a worried dancer's. He held his head to one side and regarded me with bright interest.

"I hate gardening," he said; "I wanted a studio with a north light, and I had to take a garden with a north light too. Nothing grows in the damn thing but weeds and those rhodo-whatsits. Used to employ a gardener, but he was damn lazy. He stood in the doorway when it rained, looked at the sky and smoked herbal tobacco. Looked at the sky, he did, and I don't suppose he saw a bit of beauty in it."

He walked across to the coffee-table and stared at the pot and the cups. "Elegant, aren't they?" he said with his sly and charming grin. "If I were married we'd probably have a silver set, and little cups the size of your thumb-nail, and a lot of silly woman-chatter." He sat down on the hassock with his knees bent and his short trousers tight against his thighs. He was a mischievous gnome looking up at me as I sat reluctantly on the film company's Regency chair. "I like things big, I like big brown tea-pots, like a Rubens' nude. Big arms, big belly, robust. I hate things that haven't got the strength of their convictions. You newspaper fellas haven't for a start."

There we were again, but I let him use me as a whipping-boy for the Press, and I smiled back at him, foolishly I've no doubt.

The sunlight that was denied the garden none the

less filled the room with a cool green light, and gave to Lovett's white hair a faint luminosity. The old man poured out the coffee, spilling it in the saucer as he pushed a cup toward me. It was not elegant, certainly, but it was companionable.

I listened while he chattered. It was not conversation, it was sly chaffing mixed with bursts of explosive invective, anecdote with anathema, but there was no mention of Mather and I began to wonder discontentedly whether I would have to dig for the story after all. Lovett's hands moved like excited moths over the table. Behind the pink, wrinkled face was a surprisingly boyish spirit, prejudiced and palpably unjust at times, but always alive. His thoughts and opinions floated smoothly on the stream of his emotions.

He had always enjoyed life. "Nobody knows what it is to work. My father made shoe polish. Lovett and Clark, Ltd. Did you know that? They advertised it with 'Gentlemen are well-polished, like their shoes—if they use Lovett and Clark'. Bloody awful, eh?" He raised an eyebrow and stared at me. "You didn't know that, eh? Journalists know everything about our private lives, don't they? What you don't know, you invent. The things you've invented about me. Had me married once, by God! I've popped into many beds, God knows, but never been tied to one." He cackled, and then an expression of such sad nostalgia swept over his face that I looked away from him with embarrassment.

"My father had a factory in the west country, years, years, years ago now," he said, looking beyond my shoulder. "Damn smell of boot polish was all over the house. He wanted me to go into the business, seemed to think it was my Christian duty. He was a Victorian like that, even making boot polish was fulfilling some manifest destiny. I wanted to paint, and it was easy so

long as I was prepared to work. Fathers never understand that boys are willing to work hard, given their own choice. Mothers understand, mine did anyway, but mothers are the only sensible women. Ever noticed that?" His eyes suddenly found mine and I resisted an impulse to ask him what he knew about it.

"You young fellas don't know how to work. My father thought I wanted to live a lazy life. God, he was wrong! When I lived in Paris I worked as a guide during the day. . . ." One of his white, bony hands sought his cup and it clattered nervously against the saucer. "Five bob a day. Enough to buy paints and coffee. Enjoyed every damn minute of it, I did, so long as I could work. But these boys nowadays paint five pictures a year, sitting on their backsides in Spain or Majorca, all purple and clay colours, and show 'em in Bond Street and think it's work. *Work!*"

His sharp, derisive hoot seemed to project him from the chair. He bounded across the room to pick up the Siamese which had walked into the studio, contemptuously flicking its brown tail. "They're donkeys, they'll never learn. Look at that fella Matisse, painting rubbish all over the walls of a chapel now. Worse than Mather. . . ."

At least we were approaching Mather. I was conscious that it was Wednesday, that neither Cooper nor Vaughan would expect me to spend a week on this story, however pleasant it might be for me. All the little tragedies and comedies of the world, the murders, the rapes, the brides left deserted, the priests taken in sodomy, the political crisis, the bus crash and the burning plane, they would all be pressing in on us by Saturday, and the Mather Story would have to be great to take precedence over them.

Lovett seemed unaware of this. "The public's to

blame, they don't see the hypocrisy, or when they do you fellas won't let them shout about it. In the old days the Church was a patron, and by God a hard patron she was too. When artists painted the glories of the Church they may have been lechers and liars, but by God they believed what they painted. You can see it, boy. When they painted a nude they meant to tell you that if she was bedworthy she was more, she was God's brilliant handiwork. Now, do the Mathers and the rest of them to-day mean that . . .?"

This apparently inconsequential lecture on the fundamentals of Art had some purpose after all. Lovett, I realised, was approaching the subject of Mather, not directly because something was embarrassing him, and he was clouding his embarrassment with words.

I caught too the note of something more. I may be an indifferent journalist, but there is something to which a Sunday newspaperman has his ear well tuned, the note of the lickerish. Sunday may be God's day, but it is also the day when the great British reader likes to reflect on the immorality of his neighbours.

I leant forward in my chair, to say something that would direct Lovett, that would bring us to the Mather Story quickly, but before I could speak the words burst from him again.

"What d'we get now? Nudes like a Veronese? No, like a string of sausages. Angels like blowsy public-house tarts."

The Siamese cat curled the spring of its body beneath his nervous fingers, and wrenched itself free with a harsh mew of disapproval.

"Here Ming, here Ming!" squeaked Lovett, clicking his fingers toward the animal, but it bent its delicate head over one paw and ignored him. Lovett turned on

me suddenly. "What do you say about that fella, Mather, eh?"

I smiled my relief and took a cigarette from the box he pushed toward me with his foot. "You have the story, sir, not me. I'm waiting to hear it."

My frankness did not displease him. "All you fellas want is a story. But what I've got for you isn't a story, I want to tell you something that will stop you all making a genius out of that man." He walked up and down the room and then stopped at the bookcase, pulling a brown file from it. He dropped it on the hassock and then continued to walk up and down, kneading his knuckles. "He got a thousand pounds from Australia for his *Ascension*. He got another thousand from some German in South America for his *Crucifixion*. Did you see it?"

I nodded. I looked at the end of my cigarette and said: "Does he make much money?" And I hoped Cooper would be satisfied with the answer.

"Money?" said Lovett, "I don't know, damn sight more than me, anyway. They hung that Crucifixion in the Academy that year. You fellas called it the Picture of the Year as usual, and every damn fool from Hounslow to Knightsbridge came to gape at it. There was Christ, painted in cubes, in little blocks of pink and purple, no perspective, no power, by God! Roman soldiers in battledress, and an electric train coming out of a red hill. *And* the atom bomb or something blowing off in the background. I told 'em the thing was a monstrosity. I told 'em Mather must be pulling their legs. What did *they* say? A lot of clap-trap about Mather's efforts to bring the traditional story into contemporary perspective. And what the hell does *that* mean?"

His face was pinker, his eyes angry. "Ramsay . . ." he began, and then stopped.

I watched him uncertainly, aware of the bewildered agony and confusion below his circus clowning. He stepped sharply across the room and picked up the cat again, holding it close to him as if he needed the sensuous comfort of its serpentine body. The brown tail flickered angrily beneath his elbow. He stared down at it, and then his grip relaxed and the animal leaped away.

He walked slowly to the window. "I painted the view from this window once," he said, "across the garden, those bushes and that blue mist of houses. D'you see it?"

I got up and stood before him, and thought I saw the scene through his eyes. "It is beautiful," I said.

"It was in the Academy, a little thing, but of course they put it in the damn shadow, next to one of Mather's abominations. They stood around looking at his and leant on my little garden. I'd worked hard at it, wanted people to see it as I had in the evening; I painted old Anna, my housekeeper, down there in the dusk by the rhododendrons. She looked like an ectoplasm, I remember. You might say it took me fifty years to paint that piece."

He walked away from the window. "I don't understand what people want. Do they want this sort of thing, or Mather's angels? Does it mean that everything I've been doing for fifty years is wrong, is stupid?"

I have never seen an old man so near to tears. It was as if I had uncovered his nakedness and discovered not dignity, but something comic and pathetic.

He rubbed his hands together nervously. "What do you think, Mr. Ramsay . . . What do you think of a man who uses his divine obligations to interpret the religious story in terms of comic strips instead of beauty? D'y'understand what I'm trying to say?"

I nodded, but there must have been impatience in the movement for he looked at me sharply.

"I say . . . Don't think I don't know what you want. You don't give a penny whistle for art, and neither does that damn rag of yours." Now, I thought, now I am to be sent to hell again, and I sighed. He heard the sigh and smiled impishly. "It's all right, young fella, I won't kick you out again. You came for dirt, and God help me I've got dirt. But *you* won't publish it."

I raised my shoulders and lowered them resignedly, hoping thereby to explain to him that I thought nothing could delude him. He could also, if he wished, interpret it as an apology for my paper.

He clawed at my arm. "What d'y'call a fella who paints one thing and thinks another, ch? All those damn psycho-whatsits probably have words for it as long as my arm. But he's just an old-fashioned hypocrite. An honest man is a man who is honest with himself, and he doesn't spit on that honesty. He doesn't spend the hours of darkness scribbling on lavatory walls!"

Then at last the story broke, for he whirled toward the hassock, picked up the brown file and brandished it in the air theatrically. "*Here's Mather's lavatory wall!*"

I held out my hand. "May I see it?"

Perhaps he did not hear me. He did not give me the file, but moved about the room, waving it. "What should I do with it? Keep my damn mouth shut like a gentleman? But I'm not a gentleman, my father made boot polish for gentlemen. Should I blast it over the dirty news-sheets like you want me to do? Tell the Academy? Send it back to Mather with a dignified note, or do nothing at all?" He stopped, frozen, with one foot out in a pointed step, his lips parted. Then he tossed the file toward me.

It opened on the floor at my feet, spilling a dozen foolscap sheets of cartridge paper in a yellow fan.

For some seconds there was silence. I heard the excited chittering of a robin among the bushes below, the distant, drowsy hum of traffic. A fly buzzed futilely against the barrier of the window. I found myself unable to focus my eyes on the sheets of paper at my feet. Lovett's passionate fury had disconcerted me, I had a reserved man's shame in the face of another's emotional nudity, and I could not pick up the paper.

Then the cat, picking a delicate way across the file, broke the spell.

"Pick 'em up!" Lovett's voice was harsh. "Look at 'em! Pick 'em up and tell me what you think of them."

I gathered the foolscap into my hands and held them there. I looked from them to Lovett who was standing in a twisted shaft of light, his face red, his hand outstretched like a Victorian statue in a provincial square. By the expression on his face I knew that he realised he had made a mistake, that he should not have given me the file. But it was too late. I had the Mather Story.

The sheets of paper were thick, yellow at the edges and old. They crumbled between my finger and thumb. I did not read what was written on them, a column of neat text dropping down the right side of each sheet in what seemed to be verse-form. On the left-hand side were pen and ink sketches of such robust vitality that their writhing and grotesque animation seemed three-dimensional. Their first impact was of their life-like mobility, they seemed to be moving rhythmically. Their second impact was unrestrained obscenity, the artist trying passionately to recreate his shame and pleasure.

"Well?"

"These are Mather's drawings?"

"The whole damn thing is his. Drawing, writing,

everything." He snatched them from me and shuffled them. "Of course they're Mather's. Woman like a sausage, man like a circus effigy crawling over her. Read them!" He pushed them back into my hand.

His contempt and distaste were infectious. Long, old-forgotten prejudices prickled at the back of my brain, the memory of youthful pornography, giggling, surreptitious confidences behind school walls. And in my hand Man and Woman were locked in an eternal orgasm.

"You see what it's all about, doncher? A hymn, a pæan, a eulogy, or whatever you like to . . . what's the damn name, it's there. Ashtoreth. It says so at the top. You know who she was? Well, neither did I until I read the damn thing. Ashtoreth, Ishtar, or Astarte, whatever the Greeks or Romans or Jews called her. She was worshipped by the Hebrews as a wild escape from orthodox Judaism, though God knows what old Anna would say about it if she knew.

"They went up into the mountain temples and worshipped. Not on their knees, not on their knees in prayer anyway. Girls and boys, men and women, cohabiting like a lot of sheep. Lecherous lot! Now isn't that the sort of cultural mumbo-jumbo an undergraduate mind would cloak its obscenity in?"

He swept the papers from my hand again and waved them in the air. I wanted to laugh. The Mather Story was a comic story.

Even as I stood there watching this angry little man my mind was grappling for an opening paragraph, for the telling sentence. I picked up the papers when he dropped them again. There was a curious pattern in each earthy drawing, so that each joined the other to form a disturbing whole where the naked bodies entwined with terrifying unanimity of purpose. There

was a bitter, hating irony in them. Those features of a woman's body conventionally associated with beauty were understated, the face, the hands, the feet. Mather's pen had brutally drawn those monstrous thighs, the heavy, waiting breasts, the hips which twisted in a paroxysm of pleasure and pain. The last sheet of all carried a single drawing, a nude woman hanging from a cross, her head and eyes averted from the man at her feet. There was something in that pose that seemed familiar.

I turned the papers face down in the file, and moved my tongue against the taste in my mouth. I did not know what I was expected to say. In the garden the robin chattered on, and the cat leaped to the window-sill and watched the bird with its malevolent, oriental eyes. But Lovett was waiting for no comment from me.

"*Dirty!*" He spat out the word as if it had been lodged between his teeth. "These aren't the ordinary sort of bawdy drawings every artist does at some time or another, generally when he's young, or drunk, or in love, or all three. This . . ." his finger darted at the file, "This is something different; it's calculated obscenity and calculated blasphemy. It's what the man really believes. You read the text? I wouldn't be surprised if he practises the Black Mass down there in that wretched church of his . . ."

"Where did you get them?" But he had not heard me.

"I say every artist does something, you know. There's work by Rembrandt, they say, good lusty peasant types rogering, y'know. But they're healthy, animal maybe, but healthy. But this . . . this is diseased."

The little man had been transformed from a comic pigmy into an injured giant. The injury had struck

deep below his skin of bewilderment and confusion. His cravat had become loosened by the working of his throat.

"What proof is there that they are Mather's?" I could hear both Vaughan and Cooper asking that question of me.

"Proof?" He brought his body to attention. "There are his initials at the bottom. That's his style too. Look at the woman's thighs, buttocks like an elephant's. The man like an insect, creeping and crawling over her."

"Where did you get them, Mr. Lovett?"

"Fella gave them to me. Thought they would amuse me. Amuse me! *Christ!*"

"When did Mather draw them?"

"I don't know that either. Last year. Ten years ago. . . . What difference does it make?" His hand, which had picked up the drawings again, began to tremble. His finger-nail rattled on the drawings.

I walked across to the window, rubbing my chin, pretending to be deep in contemplation. I was wondering whether Lovett would be rash enough to tell other reporters now that he had told me. The story was only a good story as long as we had it to ourselves.

"Now, young fella," his voice was calmer now, "here's what you should do. Instead of playing follow-my-leader about Mather, instead of writing about his genius and piety, you keep these damn things in your mind and remember them next time you have to write about his paintings."

There was no point in telling him that I had never written about Mather's paintings, and that while I remained a reporter for the *Sunday Standard* I never would. He could not see the story he had placed in my hands so innocently. He could not see it because he did not think like the four million readers of the *Sunday*

Standard. He had said, quoting Cooper, "People aren't interested in art, only artists." But he could not see that here would be a demonstration of that theory. They would not care about Mather's hypocrisy, his piety, or his paintings, but their Sunday morning would be all the more exciting for so obscene a quarrel between him and Lovett.

My mind at that moment was concerned with the mechanics of the story. It was as yet passive, inactive. I remembered Cooper's repeated urge: "A story must be positive, something must be happening. If it isn't, *make it happen!*"

Nothing was happening. Lovett had the drawings, they were Mather's. But what was being done?

"What are you going to do about this shocking thing, Mr. Lovett?"

He looked at the papers, dropped them to the floor, and moved them with the toe of his shoe. "I don't know," his voice was tired, "I ought to burn them, but some fool will one day raise a howl at that. Since they're Mather's they'd probably fetch five hundred quid from an idiot with money." I mentally recorded the sum, then Lovett's voice quickened. "What I'd like to do, what I feel I should do is show them to the Council of the Academy, or take them to Church House. But you don't want to say anything about that, do you?"

I did not answer, turning the sentence over in my mind. He had not asked me to say nothing, he had told me that I did not want to say anything. The statement meant nothing. I looked down at the writhing drawings beneath his feet, and it seemed to me that his tiny, shining shoe was attempting to squeeze evil from them. If I had any feeling it was that the sexual act had suddenly become an unbeautiful thing, and we were wise to perform it in darkness. Perhaps that had been

Mather's intention ; mixed with his unrestrained portrayal of lust and agony was a bitter and ironic contempt for their ugliness.

"Nice to have seen you again, young man."

It was an abrupt dismissal ; Lovett was standing there with his hand outstretched. I took it and held it. "There's one point, Mr. Lovett. I'm only a reporter, you know. What goes in the paper, or what doesn't, can't be my responsibility."

"I know. Know your editor, what's his name?"

"Walter Cooper."

"That's right, I've met him. Well, you tell him, and he'll understand."

I began to speak briskly, hurrying through the small deception. "He'll probably understand your views, Mr. Lovett, if he could see this for himself." I nodded at the foolscap. "That is, if you've no objection to my taking some of them. I can return them almost immediately."

Lovett rubbed his finger up and down the side of his nose and stared at me. He seemed surprised. "You don't want this muck, do you? You shouldn't worry about it. It's not the real point, it probably wouldn't be fair to pillory the blackguard. I shouldn't part with them. Never know what a newspaper will do."

I laughed. "It's refreshing to meet someone who does *not* believe we are reliable, Mr. Lovett."

His shrill laughter rattled against the windows, and at the sound of it the cat leaped sideways with a frisk of its tail. Lovett caught the animal with his foot and rolled it over on the floor. "All right," he said, "let me have them back this evening. I'll be at my club for dinner."

He took me by the arm and walked to the gate with me. He gestured vaguely toward the monkey-puzzle tree with his head. "Horrible thing, isn't it? Like a

modern painting. I'd pull the damn thing up if I weren't afraid its roots would tear up the foundations of the house. Good-bye, my boy, come again, whenever you like."

As I walked down Hamilton Terrace an artery began to throb insistently in my throat. The words of the story were beginning to fall in on the parade ground of my mind.

I had not gone a hundred yards before I heard Lovett's voice calling "*Hey!*" I turned and saw him pursuing me, skipping brightly along, pausing once to hawk into the gutter and then waving his hand toward me as he ran again. I thought, he is coming to take the papers. He has understood and he is coming to stop the story.

But when he reached me he said a little breathlessly, "You won't forget, young fella? Get 'em back to me at my club this evening."

SEVEN

ALTHOUGH it was early afternoon Vaughan's lamp was burning, a lozenge of light above the dark desk. He nervously plucked his moustache and jerked his shoulders. About us the Cloisters hummed lazily with noise, not loud enough to drown Vaughan's soft giggling. He moved Mather's sketches on his desk with one finger and looked up at me. "That it?" he said.

"That's it," I said. "It's a good Sunday-paper story if we handle it the right way. On its own it means nothing, but if we can paint the picture of one irate old man accusing another of drawing dirty pictures, if we're modest about them, and a little moral behind our grins, Lovett threatening to expose Mather to the Academy and the Church . . ."

"Has he?" asked Vaughan suspiciously.

"Not quite," I admitted, "but he's said he ought to. He said the drawings are probably worth five hundred pounds."

"O.K., John. Get all those little bits in. Everything you've told me. It's a tricky story, but knock it out for the lawyer, anyway. I'll get pictures on to the job." He pushed the sketches toward me. "Don't waste too much time on it, I've got another job for you."

I gathered the pages from his desk and they fluttered in the draught as the door was opened. Cooper walked in, pushing a cloud of cigar-smoke before him majestically. The atmosphere in the room changed

subtly. The smile stayed on Vaughan's lips but he looked at me now as if we had never been friends. I was a reporter, he was the News Editor, and the power above us both had made an entrance. As Vaughan half-rose from his chair it was almost as if he were making an obeisance.

Cooper lowered himself gently into the arm-chair by the window, opened his jacket and let his chest swell out against his white shirt. His great body overflowed the chair, and his tiny feet seemed smaller than ever. He took the cigar from his mouth and held out his other hand without a word. I put Mather's sketches into it, and I thought I heard Vaughan sigh as he sat back in his seat.

Cooper looked at the drawings, turned them over in his hand and then peered closer at the text. For a moment a puff of yellow smoke hid his face and then he put the papers on the corner of the desk and looked at me. I explained the story and a faint smile flickered for a moment behind his tired eyes. He put the cigar back into his mouth and folded his hands across his stomach.

"Good story, eh, Walter?" said Vaughan, uncertainly I thought, and Cooper answered by sucking in his cheeks. It was non-committal, and we knew him enough to say nothing until he spoke again.

"What's Lovett's interest?" he said at last. "Have you got a quote from him?"

"Yes. Of course he doesn't see the story as we do. He thinks these drawings will induce us to do a powerful piece about Mather's weakness as an artist." I could not resist a faint touch of sarcasm. "Next time we do an art story."

"What does the daft man think we are, the *Observer*?" We smiled obediently and he grinned at us. He pulled

himself from the chair and fingered the sketches again. "You'd better do the story, Ramsay, and let the legal eagles see it. Have you got a quote from Mather?"

"I shouldn't think we have a chance of getting one."

It was foolishly said and involuntarily. Cooper looked at me and slowly moistened his lower lip. "Send Llewellyn down," he said to Vaughan. "A job like that will need a hard-news man."

Vaughan flushed for me. "Ramsay can handle it all right, Walter. If anyone can get in to Mather on a thing like this, Ramsay can do it."

Cooper walked gently toward the door and paused. "All right," he said, "but we must have a quote from Mather. We must be impartial in this." And then he was gone and there was only the rich scent of his cigar to prove that he had actually been with us.

Vaughan stared at me with disgust. "You're a right character, aren't you?"

I smiled ruefully. "I could've cut off me tongue."

"I spend weeks conning Walter into believing you're one of the best men we've got and you say a thing like that. Go and write your story, not more than twenty four-line pars."

I sat down on the window-sill. Cooper's lack of enthusiasm had irritated me. The surly echo of thunder sounded an alarm at the top of the ventilation shaft and I looked through the window to bright beads of rain falling swiftly down the well. "What do I say to Mather when I see him?"

"Hell!" said Vaughan. "How do I know what you'll say? Or maybe you're like the rest of them, go along and say, 'Please don't blame me, sir, it's my news editor. I wouldn't work for a dirty rag like this if I hadn't a wife to keep'."

I grinned. "Is that what you used to say?"

"For Christ's sake go and do the story. Now I'll have to put someone else on the other job."

"Make sure it's a hard-news man."

The city was black with rain beyond my window as I sat at my typewriter. The reporters' room was empty, and dry with the smell of cigarette-smoke. Galley proofs were moving gently on a spike near the door, and Llewellyn's green umbrella oscillated gently on the hat-stand.

I began to type:

"The Council of the Royal Academy and the Archbishop of Canterbury are to hear grave charges of immorality brought against a fellow-artist by the well-known Royal Academician, Mr. James Lovett . . ."

It was not a good beginning, and I lit a cigarette and stared at the typewriter with disapproval. It was too grave, too serious for so comic a situation. I tore the paper from the machine and inserted another sheet.

"Charging a fellow-artist with producing blasphemous and 'naughty' pictures, Mr. James Lovett, R.A., will this week place evidence before the Council of the Royal Academy . . ."

It was better, but still not good. I began to litter the floor about my feet with discarded copy-paper. At last I discovered the right blend of gravity and impertinence and the carriage of the typewriter clattered along confidently. Llewellyn and Purcell came in before I had finished, their coats wet with rain.

"Ramsay has a powerful piece," said Llewellyn, and I nodded to them, my eyes narrowed against the cigarette in my mouth. The story rattled to its conclusion.

“‘There’s no doubt, m’boy,’ said Mr. Lovett, brandishing the ‘naughty’ pictures in my face, ‘there isn’t a decent church-going man or woman in the country who’d look at the fella’s work after this.’ ”

I typed “*More to follow*” at the bottom of the page, gathered the sheets together and stapled them.

“Bit early to be doing the splash, isn’t it?” said Purcell as I went over to the door. He looked at me with his eyes wide in mocking respect.

“Somebody,” I said with dignity, “somebody has to fill the paper so long as the rest of you are just working for the spike.”

I took the story into Vaughan, and walked about his room whistling softly as he read it. He read it twice, and the only comment he made before he put it into his basket was, “Put the time and date on your stories, for God’s sake.”

“What was the other story you wanted me to do, Jack?”

He stood up and gently palmed his hair. “You’re off it. Purcell’s going to do it. The boy friend of that girl who poisoned herself in Paddington station. Somebody wants to hold a seance so’s he can get in touch with her. We’re laying it on to-night.”

I shuddered obviously. “I’ll take Mather,” I said.

Before I left, Grant, the Picture Editor, came in, carrying that distorted hump on his back as if he were challenging us to ignore it. He put a pile of pictures on the desk, pictures of Mather and of Lovett. They were old, marked by retouchers, yellow and faintly pathetic. I looked at Grant. “You scraped the bottom of the barrel for these, didn’t you?”

“I’m asked for pictures in the library,” said Grant.

"I get them. One day somebody's going to tell me why they want them." I gave him a copy of the story and he read it slowly, working his tongue about his teeth. When he had finished he put the copy on Vaughan's desk. "Yes?" he said, as if I had asked him a question.

Vaughan grinned up at him malevolently, and Grant said, "Who's going to read *that*?"

"How do you know what people will read, you old crock?" said Vaughan.

The abuse mollified Grant. "It was a rhetorical question," he said, more cheerfully. "I don't pretend to know what people want. When I was a reporter in Bradford I used to be Our Religious Correspondent every other week during the summer. I could tell what people were interested in by counting heads of the congregations. But when our dear friend, Mr. Davies, the Features Editor, came to this big city with me he said, 'We ought to get this straight, what should our attitude be when we're dealing with a circulation of four million?' I didn't know the answer to that so I changed the subject."

"We don't take attitudes," said Vaughan, sitting down at his desk and crouching there like a surfeited frog. "We report facts." He looked at me ironically.

"*Right* you are!" shouted Grant with a sudden and comic twist of his ugly back. "Someone had to say that, and it might as well have been a News Editor."

"Well, take all these damn pictures away and get some new ones."

Grant went, pausing at the door to perform for our amusement a silent and grotesque dance, hunching his broken back in a manner that made my flesh quiver. Then, with a wave of his hand he was gone.

"You too," said Vaughan, waving me away and then calling me back. "I forgot, your sister telephoned.

Keep your relatives off my neck, John, there's a good chap."

I went back to the reporters' room, to the thickening smoke and the rain against the window, to Llewellyn's toneless whistling and the rapping typewriters. I telephoned Mary. Her voice was warmer than it had been in the morning. "I have been talking to Malcolm," she said, and I knew she meant that Malcolm had been talking to her. "I think that perhaps we ought to have Mother here after all, for a while anyway. Then, if she wants to stay, she can." She paused. "She can stay until she dies."

"Thanks. But need you be so brutal about it?"

"Well, she is old, Johnny, isn't she? You were always too sensitive about these things."

"It's not that," I said, "but it would be nicer if you took her because you wanted her."

Her voice was sharper then. "Well, if you want the truth, Johnny, I don't want her. Malcolm's more charitable than I am. Mind you, she's got to come of her own free will. I don't want her here suffering in dignity, and I don't want any of her atrocious furniture."

"It's all hers, Mary. It came from the Highland house."

"That *damn* Highland house!" She italicised the word with a passion that implied more than if she had used an obscenity. "Can't you possibly persuade her to stop talking about that place, and how noble her ancestors were? Father was a minister like Malcolm, and grandfather, so far as I can judge, was a drunken old reprobate, the sort of man you write about in that horrible paper of yours. Goodness knows what Mother's people were, there are hundreds of Stewarts in the telephone book, most of them Jews."

“And what’s wrong with a Jew calling himself Stewart? What’s wrong with a Jew anyway?”

“Oh, shut up, Johnny! don’t pretend to be so broad-minded and liberal while you work for the paper you do.”

I was thinking of my mother’s faery world of romance. It was tawdry and silly, and all the contempt my sister felt for it was justified, however cruel. But it did support the structure of our mother’s emotional existence, and I could not find it in me to despise it.

“*Are you still there?*”

“I’m still here, Mary. Let her bring just one thing to remind her of the house, will you? I’ll make certain it’s something small. Not the hat-stand, for example.” The lame humour did not amuse her.

“It had better be small, Johnny. Good-bye.”

★ ★ ★

That evening I met Mather’s model.

His entry in *Who’s Who* had given two addresses, one in a village in Kent, the other along that borderland between Chelsea and Fulham where there is a public-house appropriately called World’s End. There is a railway line, leading nowhere and coming from nowhere, and seemingly serving no useful purpose but to cut a sharp distinction between a world of poverty without talent and another of talent without riches.

The house had been there long before the railway had been cut, and the lines and the sleepers and the cinders must have passed over what was once its garden, for a broken-windowed greenhouse leaned against a side-wall and surveyed the paradox of three square yards of black grass. On the other side-wall, facing north, was a great studio window, a bay blown out from the yellow brick like a blister.

The doorstep was a litter of milk bottles. There was a rusty bell-push that did not work, and a twisted knocker hanging by one screw. I beat on the door with my fist. When a train went by in a flurry of steam, dragging a jostling trail of wagons, the steps I stood on shuddered gently.

Then she opened the door.

With most people our first impressions are of their clothes, some feature of their faces. With this woman it was a circumambience impossible to explain or describe. She carried it with her, and I felt that had I been able to touch it my fingers would have been burnt, not by heat but by ice.

This I sensed before my eyes studied her and saw the dark hair drawn tightly behind one ear, the knotted handkerchief of startling white about her head, the white skirt stained by crimson roses. I was disconcerted by my own adolescent emotions. Her beauty was harsh and commanding, and it stopped the blood. She was not young, youth would have been incapable of wearing that lustful beauty. She was perhaps my age, perhaps younger, yet she made me feel a boy.

"Mr. Mather?"

She did not answer me immediately. She brought up one hand and pressed the fingers of it against her cheek. They were firm and strong, the hand of a man almost. She looked at me shrewdly. "He doesn't live here." Her voice was not beautiful, but it was challenging, like an opening chord struck on all strings of a guitar.

"He gives this address in *Who's Who*."

She smiled faintly. "That's true. He has a studio here, or had at one time. But he lives in the country."

"You're his model, aren't you?"

The smile lingered for a moment on her lips and then passed. "What do you want him for?"

"My name is Ramsay, of the *Sunday Standard*."

She laughed then, resting her wrist on her hip, and the action turned her body sideways in a quick and derisive movement. "God!" she said, "how awful for you."

I grinned involuntarily. "You may have a point there. But where can I find Mr. Mather?"

"At his home," she said shortly, and then looked at me with a doubtful frown. "Come up. I'll see if I can help you."

She did not wait for a reply but turned and walked toward the stairs. After the filthy, derelict appearance of the house from the street I was unprepared for the inside. The walls and banisters of the stairway were white, and in a tall vase half-way up the stairs was a great spray of beech leaves, yellow, waxen coins that trembled as we passed. I walked behind her wondering whether it was only because I knew, because I had seen this woman through Mather's eyes, or whether all men were subdued by the strength and bidding power of her body.

She took me into the studio. It must have been long since Mather had painted there, although there were canvases piled against the walls. The tall windows had pale net curtains draped across them in a careless swoop. The room was feminine without being insipid. There was a little heap of underclothing on the floor near the gas stove and she brushed it against a divan bed with her foot.

"I've made some tea," she said. "Like some? Or would you rather have a drink? There's some gin somewhere." She spoke without affectation, without that unconsciously dishonest politeness we adopt with strangers. The roughness of her tone was an acceptance of me.

"Tea," I said.

She knelt on the floor by the gas-ring, and the action moulded her clothes about her body. In five years she would be fat, blown like a rose in late summer when beauty hangs in sickly surfeit. But at this moment it had reached the height of its flowering. I wondered, why the hell can I think of her as nothing but a desirable, unobtainable body?

We went through the banality of drinking tea, and she said, "Why do you want to see Mr. Mather?" I realised then that she had no intention of helping me. She stood between Mather and the world. She was more than his model, she was a barricade behind which he could crouch.

"I think I'd better tell him that." I put the cup and saucer on the floor. Holding them was making me look the fool I was feeling.

"I don't think he'll see you," she said with gentle firmness.

I offered her a cigarette and she shook her head. I lit one myself and spoke to her through the smoke. "You know, we're used to people who try to stop us from getting our story."

She held up her head and narrowed her eyes. "He won't see you."

I was angered. "Do you decide that?"

She was not offended, she said simply, "Yes," and then, after a pause, "as far as reporters are concerned."

"Why?"

When she laughed the laughter seemed to come from all her body rather than just her throat. "You ask me that? You should be able to answer that question yourself."

"That's a little unfair, isn't it?"

"No. And you know it isn't." She bent forward and stroked her leg, folding her fingers about her ankle and looking up at me. "I don't necessarily mean that as a personal criticism of you."

"No one ever does," I said. "They're always so kind about it." Damn you, I thought, and damn the things you're making me feel. I thought I outgrew them years ago.

She got up from her chair, thrust her hands into the waistband of her skirt like a man, and walked across to the window. She looked back at me over her shoulder, and spoke with sincerity. "I know. It must be a rotten job for you sometimes. Why do you want to see him? If you can tell me I can probably arrange it."

"He may not want you to know. I'll go down to Kent and see him."

She smiled, and shrugged her shoulders. "All right. But he doesn't open the door to strangers. You wouldn't see him."

"You underestimate the Press." It was a childishly arrogant thing to say but her calm assurance irritated me.

"God knows that isn't true," she said pleasantly. "I think I know every gutter-trick they can play. I know your paper particularly."

I remembered Clayton's gossip. I found myself looking at my reflection in the mirror like an adolescent, comparing my own ordinary, unobjectionable features with The Reader and Mather. And all I could think was, at least I am not bald.

"Would you like some more tea?" she said with slight mockery.

"I don't think it would get either of us much further, would it?"

"No, but you are welcome." And then, as I picked

up my hat, she went on quickly, "This is rather childish. If what you're after is so innocent, why not tell me?"

I was tempted to tell her, even knowing that it would not help me, yet I wanted to change that confident, mocking self-assurance of her smile. "No," I said, "I'm sure he would rather I spoke to him."

She did not speak, but the fulness of her lower lip tightened against her teeth, and she shrugged her shoulders. She opened the door of the studio for me, following me down the stairs, and I was suddenly aware that there was no perfume about her. She was like an exotic scentless flower with a beauty appreciable by one sense only.

At the door I turned to her and said as pleasantly as I could, "I'd like that drink, after all. But can I buy you one?"

She smiled her amusement, slowly shaking her head. "I know of that too. If they won't talk, take them out for a drink. I'm sorry."

"Good-bye," I said. Her intuition had failed her there. I had not cared about the Mather Story when I made that offer. Or perhaps she had realised it. A woman of such animal beauty, of such age and experience must be sensitive to all of a man's motives.

I walked into Fulham Road and telephoned Vaughan. "He wasn't there. I'll go down to Kent to-morrow."

Vaughan answered irritably. "Go to-night. It's Thursday to-morrow. I don't want you to spend all week on this story." •

"How am I to get there and back to-night?"

"Stay overnight. So all right, you can't do that because of your mother," he said impatiently. "Who was there? Who told you he wasn't there? Did you get inside?"

"Of course I got inside. I didn't look under the bed, though. Shall I go back and ask if I may?"

"I'm laughing," said Vaughan sourly. "Who was there?"

"His model. The one in the sketches, I imagine."

His voice came alive suddenly. "She was? What did she say about them? Did she say why Mather did them?"

"I didn't ask her, Jack. Be sensible."

"Go back and ask her. Keep badgering her. Do you want a cameraman?"

"For God's sake," I said. "No. I'll go back." But I did not, I went to the Press Club instead and found Sean.

EIGHT

THE bar of the Club was empty but for Sean, the barman, and a fly that was whirring irritably against the door of the billiard-room. Sean was leaning on one elbow, resting his chin in the palm of his hand and staring at his glass. He was already drunk, drunk in that pleasant, melancholy fashion of his, and when he saw me he smiled gently, gyrating slowly on the point of his elbow until his hip came to rest against the bar.

"I was hoping to see you. I want a drink with you. We'll have a crack about the Street, and tell each other what's wrong with it and why. Or maybe," he said, standing up and tightening his tie, "we'll talk about virginity and decency, and the Pope."

"You're a hypocrite, Sean." I slid on to a stool beside him. "You're so obviously an Irishman, why do you have to talk like the popular conception of one? You're a bad Papist too, to blaspheme so much."

He lowered his head into his palm again and eyed me solemnly. "Perhaps," he said, "but I'm a middle-aged Irishman and every Englishman expects me to be a clown because of it."

We drank and we said nothing to each other for a long while, because between friends there was little that needed to be said. Then Sean, ordering another drink, said, "I saw Chris and his wife a while back. We had a drink together in El Vino's. When I see a girl like that I want to go away and live in Connemara. Have you noticed that, John? Some girls are so lovely that just

looking at them makes you want to do the things that lie at the bottom of your heart. This evening I want to go to Connemara, anyway. I want to go a long, long way away." I thought he was going to cry, he was that drunk. "If it doesn't offend you, John, I want to say that I'd like to go a long way from you and the Street." He put a hand on my arm. "Connemara would be nice, there's nothing like those blue mountains. There are people, damn them, who say it's the rain that gives them that sweet indigo flush, or something in the soil. There are always people who know the reason for things. They're the real enemies of true civilisation . . . people who want to know all the reasons."

His face was red and moist, and his body swayed. "It's not the rain and it's not the soil, any Irishman knows that. The Connemara mountains will be blue and barbaric for ever, thank Christ! There was only enough of the colour in the palette of God, my father used to tell us, and when it was all gone there was nothing for Fujiyama or Kilimanjaro. Or maybe it wasn't God, maybe it was primeval slime with some unique chemical in it. Hell, I'm almost a heretic!"

"You don't have to play the stage Irishman with me, Sean," I said affectionately.

"About Connemara . . ."

"You've never been there, you old hypocrite."

"Every Irishman has been to Connemara, even those Irishmen who've never been to Ireland. You, you psalm-drivelling Presbyterian, what d'you know about it?"

"Put your shillelagh away," I said, willingly entering his mood. "But until you've seen Lochaber or Glenaladale you can dream of your Connemara bog. Now, Glenaladale rises up from Loch Shiel as smooth and as bare as a green glacier. It's the whole beauty of Moidart

and there's not a soul there but a crofter and his dog. But my mother, who knows all these things, says that two centuries ago the Laird of Glenaladale could raise two hundred Macdonalds from that glen."

"You've no more been there than I've been to Connemara," said Sean in disgust. "Amn't I right?"

"You're right," I said, and we drank again.

"The truth is," said Sean, looking at me with mournful gravity, "Connemara and Moidart don't matter a damn on their own. Maybe they don't exist. But they're symbols. Let's drink to the Kingdom of Dalriada."

"*Slainte!*" we said together.

Sean smiled and moved his shoulders comfortably. The top of his shabby trousers gaped open, the knot of his tie had slipped again, and his tight, grey hair, damp with sweat, was glued to his temples like some ridiculously obvious wig. He put his hand on my shoulder and left it there.

"Where've you been to-day? What gutter have you been raking?"

I told him about the woman, and because the drink had loosened my tongue I said, "She taunted me. Have you ever met a woman you wanted to take to bed but knew there was no hope, and knew that the man who might be hers was a queer, drifting little man you wouldn't think a woman would look at, let alone love?"

"What's the story?" he asked, and I told him and he laughed. "You're a good lad, John, a good lad. For every good story, someone suffers."

Before I could ask him what he meant he leant forward and tapped my chest. His voice was thick with emotion and he went on inconsequentially. "I've never been to Connemara, all right. But it's a symbol. It's the only symbol I trust because I've never been there and seen it. When I was a boy my family lived in Dublin,

up by Fitzwilliam Square in one of those fine grey houses made of fine grey Georgian mud. We used to scour the streets for cartridge-cases during the troubles, and I kept those silly little bits of brass for years. When we went to Belfast, Jesus Mary what a place! When we went to Belfast I got me a job on a paper, covering dinners and weddings, and christenings, and priests' funerals and I.R.A. shootings. Those bits of brass symbolised all Ireland's agony for me. You don't know what it's like, Englishmen haven't shot at Englishmen for two and a half centuries. I kept those cartridge-cases on my mantelpiece, next to my shaving-brush. Then one day I looked at them, really looked at them. It must have been after I was thirty, for that's an emotional climacteric in a man's life. And then I saw that they were only bits of brass after all, something an English arms manufacturer had made a profit on. Where had all the symbolism gone? With all the grand boys, maybe. Maybe with the bullet itself, the bullet that killed a soldier or one of Mick Collins' boys. Do you see what I'm driving at? . . ."

"I'm damned if I do. But you make pleasant listening."

"You don't live, you great fool, you can't live until you've purged yourself of illusions. And you, John, you're constipated by illusions. Even about this profession."

"Here we go," I said wearily. "Now what's wrong with the Street?"

"Ach, nothing," said Sean, "it's just a job, but it has a dirty edge to it. When you wake up and find you've hurt someone, tread carefully."

"I will," I smiled, "for whose soul shall I be walking on?"

Sean closed his eyes and shook his head. "There's

no good you pretending to be a cynic yet. You've given up no point of principle. But we've all given it up sometime in this Street. Some of us with a big bang, some of us slowly over the years so's we haven't noticed it." He began to cry then. "I want to go home," he said. "Home to my dark little boarding-house where there's sausages for supper."

I took his arm and helped him from the stool. The barman called good-night to us, and Sean paused to bow. I took him down into Salisbury Square and, "It's a fine evening!" he kept saying to the sky. I called a taxi and took him home to his narrow little room in Pimlico and helped him to be sick in the bathroom. Then, while he sat on his bed with his face white and old, I took off his jacket and shoes. He rolled over on his bed and looked up at me from the pillow with intelligent amusement behind his tearful eyes.

"All right, Sean?"

He nodded and gripped my hand.

I wasn't to think of his "point of principle" again for some days.

★ ★ ★

The lonely gas-lamps in Durham Square held back the urgent darkness of the trees. At night, when the peeling plaster of the houses was hidden, and the derelict earth beneath the planes could not be seen, Durham Square rediscovered some of its Edwardian dignity. Behind its colonnaded façade it had become a world of improvised flats, of drying stockings suspended by string from the upper banisters, of little armies of milk bottles crowded in the areas, of *Board Residence* signs, of Indian students, and shorthand typists. It had experienced three burglaries, a murder, and an attempted rape beneath the trees. Its large rooms had

been bisected, trisected by partitions of wood. Its attics had been transformed into bed-sitting rooms. It had not been painted since the year of Munich, one corner had been pock-marked by the explosion of a bomb. Three of its large, subterranean kitchens were occupied by amateur prostitutes. It was old. It made a reasonable fortune for the landlord who owned it. It was ugly by day, but at night it was sometimes strangely beautiful, and it was then that I felt no resentment of the fact that this square was my home.

When I opened the door of the flat the draught fingered the Japanese windmill and, as always, filled the quiet rooms with brittle warning. Bran rolled toward me from the kitchen, his jaws slavering a maudlin welcome. My mother called as I knew she would.

“John, is that you, my son?”

I went into her room, and there she sat with her cashmere shawl falling in soft ripples across her breast and above her folded hands. A book she had been reading lay on its back by the bed. The air of the room was heavy with the scent of the one Turkish cigarette she allowed herself daily. It was not a large room but so much of her character filled it that it seemed great, each corner reaching toward her bed in perspective. A green bowl of daffodils stood behind the lamp on her bedside table, their cool arrogance mocking her unhappy face. I looked at them, and I looked at the wedding portrait that hung above the bedhead. It was an old, old photograph, a misted cloud of brown now, but there was my mother as she had been forty years ago, a slim hourglass in a wedding-veil. My father's features had long since faded from the photograph.

I sat on her bed, taking her hand in mine, and she opened her lips and slowly shook her head. “I do wish

this wretched job wouldn't keep you from home so much. I get so bored."

It was a bad beginning, for I had to tell her of my agreement with Mary. "Have you been lonely, Mother? Didn't the woman come this morning?"

"Oh, yes, she came." She turned her face away from me, and I knew that what she was going to tell me would not be true, a fiction she was inventing then. "But I went to bed early, I felt so weak. Some days the weakness is terrible, I feel as if my strength were contracting so rapidly inside me until it is no larger than a little stone. I got up to make myself some tea, but the hours pass so slowly. I heard footsteps in the square when it got dark, and I couldn't see who was there. Do you know how terrible it is to hear footsteps and see nobody?" She looked at me suddenly, and I knew that she had truly frightened herself.

"I'll move your bed, Mother, nearer to the window."

"Did it rain much? I thought we were going to have lightning. I don't like lightning when I am alone. We had no aspirins." She pushed her hand against the hair that fell across her eyes, and as the shawl slipped back from her thin arm I saw the blue veins beneath the skin. "We had such nice storms in the Highlands, and I would sit up in the bedroom and look at those great clouds rolling down *Stob Ban* like smoke." Inevitably, as she began to speak of her home, her voice brightened. "And you and Mary came in from school with your shoes wet and your faces red with excitement . . . Mary was such a lovely child. The rain rested in her hair, you could have counted the beads there . . ."

"Children make you happy, Mother."

"Children always make old people happy, John. It's only adults who make you feel old." She seemed to be quoting. "Is that silly?"

"It seems very wise to me, Mother."

"Well, I think it's silly. It's what your father used to say. I think children make me feel old. I think of all those years between us . . ."

I looked at my hands, where they rested on my knees. "I'm sure Mary's children would like to see you again, Mother. Why not go down to Guildford for a while? You can sit on the lawn of the vicarage, under the chestnut tree."

She looked at me with suspicion. "You've been talking to Mary."

I was too tired to argue with her. "She asked me if you would stay with her."

"For how long?" There was pain in her voice, and she raised herself from the pillow, resting on one elbow. "For how long, Johnny?"

"As long as you like. You'll enjoy it there . . ."

"I hate Malcolm's children," she said bitterly. She never referred to them as her daughter's.

"You'll disappoint him."

"He likes making a fuss. It's his business to make a fuss. Why did Mary have to marry a minister? She could have made a much better marriage. He's always so right. People who are never in the wrong are so tiresome. What makes it worse is that he's got God on his side when he's right."

I looked at her face sharply, suspecting her words of some subtle humour, but there was only irritation in her expression.

"People who never do the right thing when they should are also tiresome, Mother."

"You mean *me*, I know you mean *me*." She turned her face from me again, pressing her handkerchief against her mouth. "If I go to Mary's I may die, and I don't want to die in that silly little room of hers, with

chintz curtains and biblical pictures on the wall. I want to die in this bed. My Jacobite bed!" she added proudly.

I stood up in angry exasperation. "You're being ridiculous. You're not going to die for a long time, and I don't think you're being fair to Mary or Malcolm."

"Don't be angry with me, Johnny." I put my hands in my pockets and walked away from the bed knowing that a show of anger was my only weapon now. "Yes, you should be angry, you're quite right to be angry. I'm getting old and silly. I'm a burden to both of you, and it's only right that the strongest of you should take the heaviest weight. You were always so soft and sentimental, its only this wretched job that makes you hard, talking to murderers and criminals." I turned at that and laughed. "Don't laugh, it's true."

I gave in to her. "Don't blame yourself, Mother. We'll do as you wish." In the end, the family had always done as she wished.

"Sometimes I say things that I don't mean, Johnny, my son," she appealed to me, and I saw that uncertain smile lifting the flesh of her cheeks cautiously. "Sometimes I don't understand. Just now, before you came in, I thought your father was still alive. Perhaps I shouldn't be alone all day." She redraped the shawl across her shoulders, folding the pleats neatly. "And as you told me that day you got so terribly angry, your newspaper can't send you out of London overnight because you won't leave me on my own."

I remembered the day Vaughan had offered me six months with the Berlin bureau, and because I had had to refuse it, because I had refused it, I had bitterly reproached her. The memory of that shamed me now. "I shouldn't have told you that, Mother."

"And I suppose you cannot think of getting married

because no girl would want an invalid mother-in-law, would she, Johnny?" By arguing the case against herself she was breaking down my defences. She was an artist at such tactics. "You must bring the girl to dinner, Johnny. And Mr. Conlon too, and he can sing for me again."

"There isn't a girl, Mother." And I wished there were. Had there been it would have made me firm at this moment.

She looked at me slyly. "Of course there is. I know. You were always such a transparent little boy. You would never wear the kilt because you said you didn't like fancy dress, but you would sit at my feet with big round eyes when I told you the story of how the military cut down Lochiel's great trees. And remember the night you ran away to Glencoe? You said you had lost your way, but you were running away from me . . . I know. I always know." That was the devil, she always did know. And she knew now that there was no girl, and she was taunting me with my lack of a reason for sending her to Mary. She was telling me that there were only the two of us, and there was no reason for our parting.

She leant forward and took my hand between hers. "I'll go down to Guildford for a while, for a while anyway, Johnny. Perhaps if I like it there I'll stay, and you can come down often."

She had played the card well. Perhaps any other night it would have been as she expected. I would have given in, told her that she need not worry, that things would not change and she could stay with me. But to-night, I do not know what it was, something had made me firm. I stood up.

"Very well, Mother. I think it's a very sensible arrangement. I'll tell Mary."

She saw the expression in my face, and I think it was that rather than what I had said that made her pull the shawl close to her breast and say angrily and obstinately, "*No! I won't go after all. I won't go, Johnny!*"

"All right, Mother. But you must tell Mary. I'm not going to do it. And to-morrow I am going to ask if the position on the Berlin bureau is still open." It was a childish bluff, and I do not think it deceived her, for she looked at me cunningly, turning her head on the pillow but keeping her eyes fixed on mine. "What do you say, Mother?"

"Very well, John. Bring me the telephone. I'll tell Mary."

Now she was bluffing me, and tired of the foolish, useless skirmishing I brought the telephone in to her, putting it on the edge of her bed. The receiver fell from its cradle, and in the silence we heard the busy burring of the dialling tone.

She looked at me, bewildered, and then her face puckered and she began to cry again. She put out a thin hand and pushed the telephone from her. I returned it to the hall, and when I came back into her room she was patting her eyes with a handkerchief.

"All right, Johnny son. I'll go down on Sunday. Will you drive me, or should we hire a car? Your car is so small. I shall enjoy it, I haven't been to stay with Mary since the war. It'll be nice to see Malcolm's children again. Trevor is such a big boy. You'll come and see me often, won't you? I'll lie here for a while, in the light of the lamp outside, and make plans. Making plans is so exciting."

I switched off her lamp and kissed her cold forehead, and I smiled at her in the darkness. When I went to sleep that evening I felt as if the Old Man of the Sea had slipped willingly from my shoulders.

NINE

I FOUND the village with difficulty for a fold in the weald gently imprisoned it below a hill that glowed with golden whin. I stopped my car beneath the trees near The Lamb, put one leg over the other, leant back and closed my eyes gratefully. About me I heard the murmur of the village, and I stayed there, comforted by its peace and the soft sunlight, until I decided that I needed a drink.

It was not only a drink. Tobacconists and barmen are most fruitful sources of information to a newspaperman when a story is difficult. It may be that in pandering to man's lesser vices they develop one of their own, a tendency to gossip and to listen to gossip.

The bar of The Lamb was fresh-washed. Patched water dried on the floor in patterns like Mercator projections, and as I stepped into the chill air I walked in three strides from Sumatra to Copenhagen. The open windows let in the sunlight, and there was the indolent thrumming of a bee among the wallflowers outside. In the bar the smell of beer was strong, mixed with brass polish and the dry sting of ancient woodwork. The ceiling was low, one great, bending beam almost reached the top of the counter and was hung with damp-stained hunting-prints. I sat on a stool and leant my elbows on the counter and looked through the window to the yard, to the flagstones embroidered with new grass.

I clipped a coin on the counter and the barman, in shirt-sleeves with little bubbles of soap clinging to the

hair of his arms, looked round the tap-room door and grinned at me pleasantly. He came into the bar, wiping his hands and pursing his lips. He seemed happy to see a customer he did not know. I asked him for a cold pint of bitter.

"Tankard, sir?" He turned the tap of the barrel. "Used to have pewter tankards. But people took 'em away, 'specially after the war. Americans, I suspect. They don't mean it bad, but it's a shabby trick when you think of it. I mean, pewter is part of the character of a place like this."

We talked about pewter, and I deferred to his superior knowledge. I drank the beer slowly, closing my eyes as the amber liquid twisted toward my lips. The barman leant against the counter, his shirt open at the front and the black hair of his chest curling over the top of his vest. He wanted to gossip.

"A nice spring day this. Nice day for a ride in the country if you've got the time, and we haven't all got it, have we? This is the best part of Kent round here, I say. Up north you get the houses a lot, but here it's pretty. You passing through?"

"No, I'm visiting. Do you know Lionel Mather?"

"Oh, him. We don't see much of *Mr. Mather*." He emphasised the title with faint contempt. "That is . . . if you understand me, like. He's not quite what you'd call friendly. They say he's all right, though." On this soft and winning morning the barman seemed unwilling to think ill of anyone.

I pushed my tankard across the bar and asked him to drink with me. "Does he come in here much?"

The barman spoke across his shoulder as he stood at the barrel. "Who? Mather? Well . . . yes, you might put it that way. He comes in here. You a friend of his?"

I shook my head. "I'm a reporter." I pushed four

florins across the bar. "Keep the change," I said, and thus placed the conversation on a business footing. I remembered, a little ironically, a recent memorandum from Cooper: *A reporter's expenses sheet has included: ten shillings paid to a policeman for information. Let this be understood: the Sunday Standard does not buy information—FROM ANYONE!*

The barman began to speak more briskly as he scooped up the coins. "You know, I don't like gossip, but there's a man . . . well, I mean the old chap does come in here now and then. Sits in the ingle over there and drinks a double gin. Might nod to somebody now and then if he has to, but doesn't talk."

"Many people like to drink alone."

He considered this heresy politely and then rejected it. "Yes, but those sort would give you the time of the day now and then, wouldn't they?" He straightened his body. "We had some of your chaps down here once. When Mather's font was put in the church. Made a lot of mistakes when they wrote it up too. Put in something I said about Mather." He looked at me anxiously.

"It's all right," I said, "I don't want to quote you. But tell me, where does Mather live? Is it easy to see him?"

He waved his hand vaguely toward the window. "He's got an old tithe-barn down at the end of the village, and he's made it look really nice too. I don't think he'd see you, not if you went up and knocked. He runs upstairs when that happens, I'm told, and peeps from behind the curtain until people have gone."

I rubbed my chin. "What do you suggest?"

He breathed on a glass and examined its misted surface. "He's very matey with the vicar. If I was you I'd go over and see the vicar first, get him to take you across. The vicar's a nice fellow, though I don't go to

church much. He's a navy chap, got a beard. Good hand at darts, too."

"Will he be at home?"

"Oh, he'll be at home, or in his church. He's got that church on his brain, which is how it should be, I suppose. See you again sometime, eh, sir? And thanks very much."

I left my car where it was and walked up the single village street, pleasantly content, my hands in my pockets, my lips whistling silently. I felt that the world was treating me kindly; the sun shone, the story had been easy so far, my mother was to go to my sister, and the rheumatism that had been my inheritance from two years in water-logged slit trenches was giving me respite. I climbed the hill to the church, toward the restless, unending babel of the rooks, and I passed through the lych-gate and up to the porch. There the gentle wind fluttered the notices on the board and passed through the daffodils. There was the scent of old incense and the dankness of damp stones. The colours of the churchyard glittered like new paint, the black stroke of the cedar, the brilliant green of the grass, and the scarlet flowers dying on the graves. I turned and looked down the hill across the weald. Threads of mist stitched the landscape to the sky, and a single ostrich plume of smoke hung above the railway, three miles away.

Turning the iron ring of the church door I went inside, my footsteps clipping on the stones. The air was suddenly very cold, but through the clear glass above the altar the sun dropped in green ripples of light. It was a small church, too' small almost for the squat Roman columns in the nave, crowned by grinning corbels of a later century and supporting a fan-vaulted roof of exquisite loveliness.

The church was empty, and I heard my heart in the

silence there. I saw the Jacobean pulpit with its hour-glass, the incongruously elaborate font, and I felt the strange, wistful sadness that can touch one in an empty village church. My father's temple had been of red stone, brittle, Victorian, vulgar. I went into the sunlight again.

The vicarage lay beyond a flint wall to the west of the church, held in the palm of a gravel drive and guarded by Scots pine, trees that were as much out of atmosphere in that soft landscape as Spartans must have been in Athens. I walked to the vicarage slowly, carefully rehearsing my approach to the vicar, and when I came to the big door of the house I found that it was open, and beyond it an ancient hall. A stag's head hung on one wall, an eye missing and the antlers broken. There was a smell of cooking and somewhere a baby was crying. I pulled the old bell-wire and listened to the wild, excited alarum it produced.

The vicar came down the stairway at the end of the hall. At first he was silhouetted against the light of the landing window, and I saw nothing but that he was a big man. Then he came into the light. He was a heavy masculine man, his thick neck tightly gripped by his clerical collar. He pushed the air before him as he walked. His face was rough-hewn, with a beard that made him look like a Hebrew prophet in a da Vinci cartoon. Yet he was not an old man, and when he greeted me it was with a voice that came directly from a naval ward-room.

I introduced myself and my paper and he looked mildly curious. He invited me into the drawing-room, a room so large and so high, and so thoroughly drenched by sunlight that the meagre furniture crouched on the floor in embarrassment. A red setter was lying in snoring indolence before an empty grate, and the vicar

bent over it and pulled its ears. I heard his bones creak as he bent, and when he stood upright his face was red. I patted the dog too, it seemed expected of me, and for a moment we talked of dogs, sought and found a common ground. Then the vicar looked at me as if he considered that it was now time I explained my visit.

"What can I do for you, my dear chap? Please sit down, over there, this chair's got a broken spring. Nothing but the best in a country vicarage nowadays, eh? What can I do for you?" He sat down himself, on a little wicker chair by the grate, his body thrusting out an awkward assembly of bent joints as he put his hands on his knees. He wore a grey pull-over that was beginning to unravel at the neck, and as he moved his body now and then a stitch would fall apart.

"We seldom get visitors in a quiet little place like this, especially the Press. Has one of my parishioners been murdered, or run off with the grocer's wife?" We laughed at the absurdity of the suggestion.

Then I asked him if he knew Mather.

He slapped his rubber tobacco-pouch on his hand. "Indeed I do. He's our most distinguished resident. Please smoke. . . ." We fumbled a bit with matches and ash-trays and then settled into our chairs again. "A most remarkable man, Mr. Mather, and a wonderful artist. A true Christian artist, *I* have always said. Have you been in the church, have you seen the work he's done for us there?"

I nodded and said that the village must be proud of him.

"We most certainly are. And not a little grateful too, for he has helped us considerably with the Repair Fund. We had a flying-bomb near here, you know. I was away at the time and nobody did anything to stop the damage progressing. The tower was seriously undermined. The

Normans didn't expect their churches would have to cope with our civilised weapons, eh?" Again we laughed. "Was it about Mr. Mather you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, vicar, and I realise it's probably an imposition. I am anxious to see Mr. Mather, and I know he's reluctant to see any callers. Would it be possible for you to introduce me to him?"

He got up from his chair, turned his back on me, and faced the large white mantelpiece where a bowl of polyanthus turned startled faces toward the light. He rocked gently on his heels, placing his large hands beneath his buttocks for balance. The pipe stuck grotesquely from the side of his mouth. In the silence I heard the wheezing of the setter on the mat, the crying of the baby in the distance.

The vicar turned abruptly, his ear inclined toward the door. "That's my daughter," he said apologetically, "she's teething. Look, forgive my curiosity, Mr. . . . Mr. Ramsay. Why do you wish to see Mr. Mather?"

I opened my hands to show that I would be as frank with him as I could. "It's a small personal matter, sir. . . ."

He walked to the centre of the bay-window, sucking noisily at his empty pipe. "I'll tell you why I ask. Mr. Mather is a very great man, and a very simple man. You know how it is, men like him, with such genius, are often children. I'm not a reader of your paper, to be quite frank I don't like it. It seems so . . . well, to be frank, some of its activities are often reprehensible." He smiled at me. "I don't mean this personally, old chap, and I'm probably an old-fashioned stick-in-the-mud."

There seemed no comment to make on that, and I sat where I was, smoking. "My dear fellow . . ." he went on, "it's just that I don't wish to be responsible for

something that might injure Mr. Mather, something that might upset him at least. I know you're misunderstanding me, but couldn't you write to him? . . ."

I stood up, stubbed out my cigarette and smiled. "I quite understand, vicar. Newspapermen have a job to do, and it's often difficult to do it without offence."

"Of course, of course. I dare say a lot of people think we ministers are trouble-makers sometimes. But . . ." He opened his arms and shrugged his shoulders.

I picked up my hat. "I did not wish to alarm Mr. Mather. I know his reluctance about publicity, and his natural shyness. I thought that he would be reassured if I approached him through a friend."

But I should have known that the vicar would not be deceived by such thin nonsense. "My dear fellow," he said, sweeping his hand across his body in expostulation, "how do I know that he will be reassured when I don't know what you want to see him about?" He tried to soften the inference of that by jocularly. "I don't even know you are really a journalist."

I did not accept it as jest and showed him my Metropolitan Police pass. The yellow card with its flaming red letters impressed him. "I was joking, of course," he said, "but you realise my difficulty?"

"Of course," I said, and I moved toward the door. He came with me, holding my arm above the elbow. I think he was truly sorry that he could not help me.

"I was admiring your church before I came here," I said, remembering the barman's information. "It's twelfth century mainly, isn't it?" I did not add that I had read this in the Gazetteer before I left London.

He turned with a smile of pleasure. "Yes, how clever of you to recognise that. The tower is wholly twelfth century, and parts of the chancel. But the columns in the nave are Roman, and the roof, you saw that wonderful

vaulting, that's much later. It's a very fine church, although this is a poor living, quite too small for this barn of a vicarage, eh? A local squire built this place about a century ago." At the door of the hall, as we stood on the step, he held my hand in both of his. "If you're walking through the churchyard I'll come across with you."

"That's very kind of you, sir. That Jacobean pulpit seems out of character, I thought."

"It does, doesn't it? Something in stone would be more in keeping. Yet Mr. Mather's font seems perfectly at home." We walked up the path to the wicket-gate of the churchyard, and on toward the tower. "I didn't think a man in your profession would be interested in old churches."

I smiled. "It's a comfort, and a change sometimes, to come across a place like this."

"Of course, of course." He chattered on happily. "You know I never like having the grass cut in the corner here. Look how thick the coltsfoot and celandine are. They're early too. All spring is early this year. Those wild flowers, nobody ever pays much attention to them, but I encourage children to bring them to church. They have such good, earthy names. What do you think of Yellow Bedstraw for example, eh?"

We had reached the church porch, and below us the sun fell full on the little village, glistening on the windows. "Mr. Mather's father was captain of bell-ringers here, wasn't he?"

"Old George Mather? He was before my time, but he was a fine type I'm told. He's buried over there. He chose that headstone himself, said he wouldn't have his son designing some monstrosity for him." He pointed toward a thunderous monolith of black marble, and we both smiled.

The vicar put his hand affectionately on the warm stones of the tower, looking upward. His beard jutted out from his chin aggressively.

"Look there, Mr. Ramsay. Do you see that iron stanchion at the top of the tower? Well there used to be a firebasket on that. A previous incumbent, he was something of an antiquarian, wrote a little monograph on the church. He discovered that it was something of a centre during the Peasants' Revolt in the fourteenth century. They lit signal beacons in the basket. And just along the road there . . .", his arm swung out in an arc, pointing across the valley to the glimmering orchard blossoms, ". . . just over there the men of Kent stopped the Black Prince's widow on her way back from a Canterbury pilgrimage." He laughed at himself. "There, I'm talking like a guide. But come along with me, there's something I must show you."

I went with him, hoping that all this would be worth the time I was spending. He grasped my arm and took me into the church, walking down the aisle ahead of me with brisk, unembarrassed familiarity. He stopped by the choir stalls and got down on his knees in the dust, pointing to a square black stone beneath the ancient piscina. His narrow trousers were tight across his thighs, his body was as thick and powerful as that of a Rugby forward. He brushed his hand over the stone several times. "Do you see the carving there, Mr. Ramsay? No, of course you wouldn't be able to read it. But my predecessor, the antiquarian I mentioned, took a rubbing of it before it was almost erased by choirboys' feet. I know it by heart. He said it was carved there by the peasants as a reminder to the priests when they came to wash the chalice in the piscina here."

He stood up, and without any embarrassment began to recite: "*Jack Trueman doth you to understand that*

falseness and guile hath reigned too long and truth hath been set under a lock, and falseness reigneth in every flock."

I nodded my head. I was bored, and I looked down at the black stone, greasy from so many handprints, and wondered how many times the vicar had brought visitors to see it, and how many times he had stood there reciting its ancient message.

"That's fascinating," I said.

"Take a note of it, my dear chap. You might say it's the sort of thing a newspaper should bear in mind, eh?" He meant it kindly and patted me on the shoulder. So, to humour him, I wrote down the words on the flap of an envelope, asking him to repeat them as I wrote, and he looked curiously at my shorthand outlines.

"You know that is very interesting," he said. "I wish I knew shorthand, I could prepare my sermons much more quickly."

I decided that I could waste no more time with him, although I liked his simple good humour. "It's been very good of you, vicar. My father was a minister, and meeting you has been something like seeing him again." In fact, his boyish naivety reminded me more of Malcolm.

He seemed touched. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and forced his trousers down in heavy creases over his ankles. He looked at his feet and then up to my face. "That's very kind of you to say that. . . . Look here!" He regarded me gravely. "I was rather off-hand with you just now, wasn't I? It wasn't very courteous to turn you down like that."

"I quite understand, vicar."

"No. Look here. You *do* seem a decent chap." He grasped my arm again. "You come with me. I'll take

you over to see Mr. Mather now. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

★ ★ ★

The vicar stopped at the gate of the tithe-barn. "You see," he said, "what a magnificent sight . . ."

The barn was a glistening white against the trees, hugging to its foundations a rug of yellow and russet wallflowers. The black earth of the garden was ranked with golden and white tulips, and aubretia flowed in a purple wash across the broken brickwork. The air was soft and drowsy.

"Those oaks at the back there . . ." said the vicar, "and the garden. Mr. Mather is an artist with flowers too. He does all this himself, you know. Come in, come in!"

We went through the gate and up the broken pathway. Our feet rapped noisily on the stones, but the birds did not take flight, they scurried beneath the broad leaves of the tulips. At the side of the barn the vicar opened a door and thrust his head inside. "There's nobody in the studio," he said, and I heard his voice echoing.

Through the half-opened door I saw the interior of the barn, lit by great windows that had been cut in the north wall. Great hammer-beams of white oak dropped from the roof and spread dusty, distorted shadows on the floor. Then the vicar closed the door. "He's probably in the kitchen."

We walked to the back of the barn, stepping over a sprawling cat and her kittens where they lay on the hot stones. "Here we are," shouted the vicar cheerfully. "Here's Mr. Mather!"

I stepped inside, bending my head under the low lintel. I was in a long room that was so dark after the

brilliant sunshine outside that at first I thought no one was there. It was an untidy room, its red-brick floor chipped and uneven, and little channels of water ran between the bricks. When I closed the door I was conscious of nothing at first but a tap running musically in the sink, and my eye was held by the glistening, turning thread of water. Then I saw Mather.

Even my brief memory of him had not prepared me. He was of average height, bent over a table with his back to us, his head twisted on his shoulder. At first his expression seemed surly and disagreeable, the eyes narrowed, the unshaven chin thrust forward. But then I saw, from the squinting, irritated twist of his eyes, that he was in fact poor-sighted. His was a face you can see often enough in any market town, self-sufficient, suspicious almost, the nose too large, the mouth ill-formed, but the expression in his eyes as we walked within their focus became soft and kindly.

I looked at his ragged grey trousers, dropping wearily over his carpet slippers. His dirty flannel shirt was collarless and frayed. I thought of the woman, her black hair beneath the white kerchief, her body and the arrogance of it, and for a moment I hated Mather.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, Mather." The vicar's voice briskly shattered the awkward silence. "This young man wanted to see you, so I brought him along. Unannounced, I'm afraid, but do forgive us." He smiled, the smile he wore, no doubt, at the church door on Sunday mornings. It was a well-practised smile and Mather must have seen it many times before and grown immune to its ready charm.

Mather slowly left the table. His hands were red with blood. He had been skinning a rabbit, and he held the animal in his capable fingers, gripping the skin about the waist and pulling it back as he walked toward us. The

grey fur was splashed by the scarlet of the flayed carcass. He looked down at the body and smiled apologetically, looking up at us from under his thick eyebrows with such shy embarrassment that my spontaneous hatred of him was destroyed. In his weakness, his boyish awkwardness, I thought I saw what must have attracted the woman.

He put the animal on the table and walked across to the sink, standing in the sunlight while the water ran on his fingers. Then he wiped his hands on a towel as he spoke.

"I'm sorry." His voice was strong but uncertain, the voice of a man unused to strangers, and in the intonation of it was the round mouthing of Kentish vowels. He brushed his hand down the thigh of his trouser leg before he took mine. His grip surprised me by its strength. "I'm sorry. I rarely get visitors."

"This is Mr. Ramsay," the vicar introduced us heartily. "He's a newspaper reporter, and while I know you don't like to see the Press I thought you might make an exception." He smiled indulgently. "Mr. Ramsay seems a very nice young man. . . ."

The corners of Mather's mouth tightened and his eyes became hostile. He seemed to recognise my name and I knew that the woman must have told him, and I felt pleased that I had outwitted her.

"I've heard of Mr. Ramsay . . ." said Mather dully, and he released my hand. "I don't want to talk to the Press."

There was a silence, and in it the water tinkled on the floor of the sink. The door squeaked open to a bar of sunlight, through which walked the white cat and her tumbling, clumsy tail of kittens. They stopped at Mather's feet, and the cat arched its back and pressed its soft body against his leg. He lifted his foot and pushed the animal aside.

The vicar cleared his throat noisily. He looked at me and his cheeks were pink. Then he turned to Mather. "My dear fellow, please forgive me. . . . I didn't realise. Mr. Ramsay, perhaps we should go?"

"It's all right," said Mather surlily. He looked across at the half-flayed carcass of the rabbit on the table, its head dripping single beads of blood to the floor.

"Come along, Mr. Ramsay. . . ." The vicar put his hand on the door.

"It's all right." Mather looked up at me and frowned short-sightedly. "Now he's here, of course I'll see him."

The vicar's voice brightened. "Well, I'll leave you both," he said, but he seemed doubtful, pausing in the door. "I'll come back . . . I'll come back later and explain if you would like."

"Please," said Mather indifferently, and the vicar went. We listened to his feet on the pathway, the noise of the gate closing, and then there was no sound between Mather and me but the calling of the birds in the copse, the indignant mew of a kitten caught beneath the cat's restraining paw.

Mather did not look at me, he went across to the sink and turned off the tap, remaining there, staring out of the open window to the bottom of the garden. Then he turned his body savagely and his voice was thicker and stronger. His hands trembled.

"Mr. Ramsay, I'm not going to comment on the way you tricked yourself in here. I don't know why you should wish to see me so desperately. Please understand, it's not that I want to be rude, but surely there's nothing about me that can interest you. I'd like to be left alone." He looked down at his hands and rubbed them together, as if he had become conscious of their trembling and wished to halt it.

"I understand, Mr. Mather. Sometimes the world

won't leave us alone, however." He did not answer me. I pulled my cigarette-case from my pocket and offered it to him, but he shook his head, and then stood there before me waiting, his hands hanging by his side, his head bent forward, and his eyes squinting weakly. The sunlight from the window outlined his clumsy figure, and behind him the vivid scarlet of the rabbit stained the table.

I pulled a copy of my story from my pocket and offered it to him. "We've a story that concerns you, Mr. Mather." He did not take it, and I let it fall on my knee as I leant against the wall. I did not feel as self-possessed as I hoped I appeared. Mather's sullen, uncooperative obstinacy was disconcerting. "In view of what it says we felt we ought to have your comment."

He turned his head to look out of the window again. He might not have heard me, but I waited. He gently moistened his lower lip with his tongue, the way I have seen children behave when they are emotionally disturbed. His profile was rough and irregular, the large nose dropping over his full mouth, and there was a heavy parapet of bone above his brows. Despite the coarseness of his face, however, there was something appealingly sensitive in it; perhaps it was the mouth, the full lower lip.

"I'm sure it doesn't matter," he said at last. "I've no interest in what the newspapers say." He turned his face to me and smiled as he had smiled when the vicar introduced us, shyly, charmingly. "I never read the papers, you see. I like it here alone."

"You ought to read it," I said gently, and held the story out to him. "It's not necessarily in the form we may publish, but you will understand the sense of it." He took the paper unwillingly, not looking at it. "Please read it," I said.

He rubbed his eyes, and smiled again. "I cannot see too well," he said, and there was a friendly note in his voice now. "I must get my glasses."

He put the paper on the table, where a corner of it rested in a convex disc of the rabbit's blood, and he shambled through to the studio. The door swung back on its weak hinges and I saw into the great cool barn again, where the green light from the garden flooded over a confusion of canvases, a crude carpenter's bench, wood shavings on the floor, and the beams thrusting downward through a veil of ancient cobwebs.

Mather rustled back into the kitchen, cleaning his steel-rimmed glasses on a corner of his shirt which he had pulled from his trousers. He smiled at me pleasantly, but still with the same appealing shyness. "This is the first time a newspaper has chosen to show me what it proposes to say. It's very kind of you, Mr. Ramsay."

I felt an uneasy sensation of pity for the man and his innocence, and I stifled it by examining the room, the flayed rabbit, the old carpet slippers, the water on the floor, and the blood-stained sink. They were "colour".

Mather lifted the paper from the table and wiped the blood from its corner with his thumb. He read silently, and when he had finished there was no change in his expression, his full, parted lips. The spectacles slipped on his nose. He read the paper again and this time he looked up at me with a bewildered frown, and thrust the paper toward me with a jerk of his wrist.

Still he said nothing, while I folded the story and put it in my pocket. He stood in the centre of the room with his trousers folded about his slippers and the kittens tugging at them. Then he drew a deep breath, as if he were pulling himself out of a crevasse into which he had slipped. I watched his chest as it moved up against the rough flannel of his shirt.

"Where did you get that information?" The tone was sharp, but the feeling behind it was only curious.

"Stories come into a newspaper a hundred different ways, Mr. Mather."

"Where did you get it?"

"I can't tell you."

He looked at me wonderingly, and for a moment I thought he was going to laugh. The corners of his mouth twitched upward and his lips parted. Then he said, "Why should you publish something like that?" Again his tone was curious only.

"You're a well-known man, Mr. Mather. When this sort of thing happens it becomes news."

"I'm only well known because the newspapers laugh at my work." There was no rancour in what he said.

"It's hardly just that, Mr. Mather. Your work has been greatly honoured. People know that you have the Order of Merit . . ."

"I noticed you made a point of that," he said, "but what difference does it make?"

"Have you any comment about the story, Mr. Mather?"

"Who is this other Academician you write about?" He moved across the table and picked up the rabbit, pulling at the skin, and I saw his powerful fingers ripping the fur from the glistening flesh. The action seemed unnecessarily brutal, and a pulse began to beat angrily at his temple.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. Is the story true, Mr. Mather?"

"You write about me, but you don't give his name?" Mather dropped the rabbit on the table, wiping his hands on his trousers. "It's nonsense. It isn't true." He began to shuffle up and down the kitchen. "I don't

understand why it should interest you . . . what is this work I'm supposed to have done?"

I showed him the photostatic copies we had made, and he took them silently. Then he surprised me, for he blushed. His neck grew red and his hands began to tremble again.

He handed them back to me. "That's my work," he said, without emotion. "I had forgotten them."

"Is there any comment you should make now, Mr. Mather? About this allegation that they are obscene and blasphemous?" He shook his head indifferently. "If the originals are sent to the Academy Council, what defence would you have?"

It was an unhappy choice of word and it exploded the emotions inside him.

"*Defence?*" His body was suddenly jerked from its heavy listlessness, gathering arms, legs, and head together in one spasm of anger. "What defence? I don't have to explain myself to you or to anybody. An artist doesn't have to explain what he does . . ."

"Surely you realise the charges implicit in this?"

"Charges!" Mather spat out the word, and with it the rest of his anger, for his voice went on dull and toneless. "Do what you please. Go away and do what you please." His eyes travelled aimlessly about the room, stopped at last on the carcass of the rabbit. He picked it up and began to drag at the skin again, wrenching the fur free in one furious movement and dropping it on the floor. He looked up and seemed surprised to see me still there.

"I don't understand why you come to me. I can't see what interest a thing like this has for you."

I drove on with my questions. "Do you feel these drawings are in conflict with your other work, Mr. Mather?"

There was an odd twist to his lips as he looked at me. It might have been the beginning of a smile or a sneer. "An artist is always in conflict," he said.

I was puzzled by his indifference. "I don't think you realise the situation, Mr. Mather. Some people might think this sort of thing indecent or depraved. Would you say it was a young man's joke, something you did in fun years ago?"

"*What do you want me to say?*" Mather suddenly exposed his bitterness. "I don't care what ordinary people think. Perhaps that's strange to you. You reporters are so interested in the likes and dislikes of ordinary people, aren't you? You poke into private matters to satisfy their dirty little hungers. I didn't invite you here. You deceived the vicar into bringing you. Now will you go?"

He shuffled across to the garden door and held it open.

"If I may advise you, Mr. Mather . . ."

He interrupted me thickly. Phlegm caught in his throat and he cleared it, hawking into the sink.

"I don't want your advice, yours or anybody like you. I don't want anything to do with you and your depraved newspaper . . ."

I was angry now. "Mr. Mather, I think . . ."

"I don't care what you think. Leave me alone." He stepped back into the darkness behind the door and his body suddenly relaxed, his shoulders fell in across his chest and his head dropped. The cat leaped through the open door into the sun, and her kittens rolled in a playful, clawing ball after her. I saw them as they tumbled on the white flagstones.

I picked up my hat and left. I said nothing in parting. It was not the first time I had been thrown out on this story, and if I had any feelings my anger was childish

enough to want to tell Mather that I had been discharged through more elegant doors than his.

I heard him slam that door behind me, and the ball of kittens, disturbed by the noise, broke into fragments of velvet and rolled among the tawny wallflowers.

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T E N

I DROVE back to London as rapidly as I could. Inside the cement shell of the Cloisters lights were already glowing. The reporters' room was full, and some of my colleagues looked up and nodded to me above their cigarettes. Typewriters were beating against the late afternoon, and Purcell and Llewellyn, in their shirt-sleeves, were held in the thrall of their work.

"Powerful piece, John?" said Robertson, scratching his tonsure irritably.

"Powerful piece," I agreed, and shouted to the girl. "Penny, darling, get me some carbon paper, will you?"

She brought me the blacks and sat on the corner of my desk as I began to type, the tips of her toes on my chair and her arms folded beneath her breasts. The wasted sting of her perfume annoyed me. "Penny, any other time you can sit on my desk or my lap as you choose. But not when I've a story to write. Go away."

She did not move instantly, but took one of my cigarettes, lit it, and regarded me through the smoke with an expression she had seen and approved on other faces, on many cinema screens. But on her young and ingenuous features it was a parody only, and she seemed disappointed by its failure. She slipped from my desk.

"Damn!" she said, "I've laddered my nylons." But I did not accept the unspoken invitation to examine the damage. "Mr. Vaughan wants your story in a hurry; he's been asking," she said tartly, and went away to Purcell. He welcomed her with a leer of mock lechery.

I typed *Add Mather Story*, and let the following words fall as they wished.

"I found Mr. Mather skinning a rabbit in the kitchen of the old Kentish tithe-barn which he has made his home.

"'It's true,' he told me, 'those are my drawings, but I can't see why there should be such a fuss. What do I care what ordinary people think? I don't have to worry about them.'

"He wiped his hands on his old grey trousers and gently fondled one of his five kittens. 'I can't see why they should upset anyone. And I don't have to explain my motives. An artist is always in conflict.

"'Those are my drawings, no further comment is necessary. Let the other fellow do what he damn well pleases. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've work to do.'"

There was more, and I let it run. I introduced our avid readers to Mather's carpet slippers, his white cat, and the black tomb of his father in the churchyard. When the story was finished I took it in to Vaughan.

He looked tired and irritable and his coat was off. "Where have you been?" he said, and I dropped the add-story on the desk before him. "No date and time again," he said; "it's like dealing with children." He read the story and shrugged his shoulders. "Was he really skinning a rabbit? Makes a nice touch. What happened?"

"He threw me out, of course. But I got in to see him." I could not resist that thin vainglory.

Vaughan grinned. "Did he threaten to slap a libel writ on us?"

"I don't think it occurred to him. He's not of this world."

“Well, it will occur to someone else, and they’ll be of this world. Go down and see the lawyer. He doesn’t like the story at all.”

★ ★ ★

In golden lettering on the lawyer’s door was painted “Legal Department”, but beyond there was only a small room, lit by an octagonal window that opened on its axis, high on the far wall. Through the dusty glass I could see the porcelain brickwork of the ventilation shaft. Here the noise that rose higher to Vaughan’s office was louder and more coarse. The sun, which could spill over the top of the shaft and just reach Vaughan’s window, never approached the lawyer’s room, and the rank odours from the canteen and the acrid scent of molten lead thickened the stale air.

The walls of the room were heavy with books. They marched in leathern ranks from the ceiling to the floor, shelf by shelf, and then fell out in disorder across the green carpet, to reassemble along the shelves that flanked a mahogany desk.

Mr. James, the lawyer, collected books. There were at least two Victorian editions of Gibbon, a first of Prescott’s *Mexico*, another of Washington Irving. There were complete sets of Macaulay and the Brontës. Their russet colour and faded gilt tooling warmed the room with a nostalgic sadness, barricading James against the world.

In this room rested the caution if not the conscience of the *Sunday Standard*. It was not James’s duty to control the ethics of the paper, merely to determine how far its irresponsibility could be contained within the laws of libel and defamation. But, as always when a man is given one responsibility, James arrogated others. He was a good man with a lonely and unquarrelsome nature

which made it easy to bear his clucking disapproval of our literary style and moral abandon.

As I expected, when I entered he was asleep. His head was bent over his desk, his hands lying like a sculptor's discarded casts among untidy galley-proofs. Because of his modest nature and unassuming manner James had no right to be tall, but he was, tall and thin, and bent a little by the weight of his extraordinary head. His face was soft, malleable as a child's, and smooth. His eyes, which could sometimes smoulder with humour, more often looked as if they were about to fill with tears.

I sat in a chair by his desk, the brown, mottled leather chair that you always find in a lawyer's office, and I waited patiently for him to awaken. I read again the titles of the books that faced me. A little carriage clock ticked briskly on the desk, and the lamp glowed pleasantly on the corona of the lawyer's white hair. I coughed, and the head rose sharply and the eyes regarded me without blinking.

"Ramsay," said James in his thin, old man's voice.

"The Mather Story," I said, hoping that we would waste no time.

But he smiled at me puckishly, and then flipped his tongue against his lips, rocking himself in his chair and staring at me, and I knew he had not heard what I had said. I knew that he was still approaching me from the warm security of sleep. He pulled his long body together and picked a pencil from the tray, drawing a neat circle on the blotting-paper and filling it with meticulous dots. Then he dropped the pencil, pulled the galley-proofs aside and produced a book, an old leather volume with gilt tooling.

"Do you like that?" he said, and I took it and nodded. "It's Samuel Mearne's work, he was royal bookbinder

to Charles II, a genius at gold tooling. Do you see the small pineapple stamp, typical of his work . . . ?” He took the volume back and held it lovingly between his hands, and when he had placed it on the desk again he continued to look at it while he spoke. “What did you want to see me about, Ramsay?”

“You wanted to see me, I think. The Mather Story.”

“The Mather Story,” he repeated, and turned his head to face me. “A naughty story, Ramsay . . .”

“A factual report,” I corrected him with a smile.

“Ah,” said James, and let the sound linger on his tongue. “Has Lovett been to the Academy?”

“No, not yet.”

“You see, Ramsay . . .” He leant his elbows on the desk so that his hands might hold his head, as if the weight of it had suddenly become unbearable. “As far as I can see at the moment, Lovett has some work done by Mather. He has made some very libellous statements about Mather to you, but he has done nothing. If we just repeat those statements we shall have no defence at all.”

I shrugged my shoulders and he sighed and resumed his gentle swinging, reaching out a hand to stroke the book he had shown me. “It seems to me we might do Mather a lot of harm.”

“It’s an amusing story.”

He looked at me unhappily. It was the same regard I once received from patient, wearying schoolmasters defeated by my obtuseness. “If Lovett does nothing at all we shall be morally responsible for what happens to Mather’s reputation, and legally too, I’m afraid. Loss of reputation, loss of income . . .” He opened his hands to embrace the unspoken calamities that could befall Mather. “It is my responsibility to save the firm money and embarrassment,” he said, in explanation.

"I understand that," I said, "but hasn't Mather any moral responsibility?"

He looked at me impishly. "Not according to your story," he said, and when I said something about it being only reporting a tiny explosion of laughter blew out of his pink cheeks. "Oh, come, come, Ramsay!" and I smiled with him.

"You know," he said, "many artists have done this sort of thing, just for devilment."

"So I'm told. Have you seen the drawings?"

"Yes, Mr. Cooper sent them down." There was a delicate expression of distaste about his nostrils, and then he surprised me by saying, "I thought the text was very good, you know, Miltonic in form, but apart from its content very impressive. I had no idea Mather could write too. It often happens with artists, and yet so few writers can paint."

I halted his garrulity by pushing the add-story across to him, and he unwound his body and pushed his glasses on to his nose before he read the paper. He shrugged his shoulders. "He doesn't seem very worried."

"I don't think he understands what it is all about."

"Obviously he doesn't read the popular press," said James a little dryly. "I can't make up my mind."

"What do you suggest I change?"

"You misunderstand me, Ramsay." He swung in his chair again and slipped his body down on the smooth leather until his long legs, with their angular knees, thrust themselves up against his trousers. I could not understand how the position gave him any comfort. "I don't see any reason for publishing the story. Did Mather sell these drawings? Are we suggesting he was marketing pornographic literature? What would be our case?"

"We haven't got a case," I said. "We've just got a story, or I hope we have."

"He can do what he likes with his own time and talent, you know . . ."

"It's a good story." The remark was wearing thin.

The lawyer's body unfolded itself quickly. "A good story!" he repeated. "Off the record, as you say, what are your feelings about it?"

I stared at him and raised my shoulders.

"I just wondered if you weren't putting it into a two-dimensional form, a fault you reporters have. Do *you* think Mather's an immoral hypocrite?"

"No, but it's hardly important what I think."

"Would it matter to you if the story harmed Mather?"

"It wouldn't." I had let the old man wander off on his moralising hobby-horse, and I thought it time to recall him. I stood up. "Well, we'll leave it, Mr. James. I imagine you'll let Mr. Cooper know the position."

He watched me with a faintly disapproving smile as I left.

When I returned to the reporters' room the rest of the staff were sitting at their desks in their raincoats. The day was over. I was closing my own typewriter when Vaughan came into the room smoking one of Cooper's cigars. He took it from his mouth and beckoned to me, drawing me into the corridor outside.

"Did you say you'd seen Mather?" I nodded. "Well, you've got to go down and see him again to-morrow. He's been on the phone, or someone has." He rubbed his cheek irritably. "Why the hell couldn't you clear up the story in one day? You'll be all week on this." He looked at me suspiciously from behind his moist glasses. "What happened down there?"

"I told you. Why?"

He pushed the cigar back into the corner of his mouth, and the effort of speaking past it produced a strangled, angry rustle from his lips. "Well, whoever telephoned called The Reader."

"*The Reader?*"

"The Reader," he repeated, "and he wants to see you after you've called on Mather."

"Me?"

"You're repeating things, John. Don't get excited, he doesn't know your name, you're just one of his minions. But he wants to see the reporter who's handling the Mather story. Why?" said Vaughan. "Do you know why? Why does a straightforward story like this become high politics?"

ELEVEN

WHEN I left my car by The Lamb I heard the church clock chiming eleven through the mist, its thin, cracked bell-note strangely wistful, and I saw how still were the trees. The birds, close to the earth, filled the air with the busy inconsequence of their voices. As I walked up the lane their bright, malevolent eyes watched me from beneath the delicate croziers of young fern.

The mist was woven loosely through the high trees about the village, and higher still boiled the sullen grey vapour of the sky. I had driven out of a London that perspired grimly in the damp morning, and there was no relief in the country. Beyond Westerham, for a few minutes, the sun had lanced the clouds, but the moment had not lasted.

I was curious to know why Mather wished to see me again. I could see how angry the model must have been, how great her bitterness for her to speak with The Reader. She had not seemed to me the sort of woman who would ask any favours from the men who had once known her. That she had done so proved how strong was her attachment to Mather. There was irony in the fact that what she had done had brought me before The Reader's eyes. An interview with him could mean all or nothing to me. Young men he employed were occasionally brought before him like stock for examination, and although I was no longer young the gap between our ages was great enough for him to regard me as a man with life before him. I would be youth to

him, the youth into which he tried to pour his own determined spirit and ambition. That was how it had been with Chris Carter. I should, I told myself, feel grateful to the Mather Story.

I walked up the wet hill to the tithe-barn. The night's rain and the morning mist had stained its white plaster, and along the bottom of its foundations were green thumbprints of moss. The wallflowers bent over with the weight of the moisture they carried, and beyond the garden the branches of the copse supported the sky with twisted arms.

I rapped on the studio door with my knuckles and heard the noise tapping against the emptiness inside. There was no reply and I shuffled my feet on the gravel with growing impatience. I was no suppliant to-day. I was there at Mather's request, and I did not suppress my impatience. I struck the door again with my fist, and called out, "Anybody at home?"

A blackbird which had been pointing its orange beak at me, and filling the silent garden with the liquid purling of its song, now swept upward in a sooted flurry of wings. I heard footsteps on the studio floor, quick and confident steps. Before the door was opened I knew that *she* would be there.

For a moment we looked at each other while the door, squealing rustily on its hinges, fell back and struck the wall behind. She gave the chill morning a sudden warmth, her head high in its arresting, arrogant beauty. Her straight hair was pulled back to the nape of her white neck and held there by a tortoise-shell comb. I thought of Goya's women, and Clayton's grudging, envious admiration. Her skirt was scarlet, her blouse black, and she wore wooden sandals on her small feet. I looked at her, as if we had never met before, and her beauty came to me fresh and unexpected.

She said nothing, but stood there with one hand on the latch, the other thrust negligently into the pocket of her skirt. Hanging on a thin gold chain from her throat, and resting between her breasts, was a tiny cross, an affectation that seemed a paradox.

I said. "Hullo. You remember me, of course. I believe Mr. Mather wants to see me again." I wanted to tell her that I had seen him the first time as I promised her I would.

She did not answer me but stepped back from the doorway in a quick movement that brushed the skirt against her legs. I went in, knowing as I passed her that she was looking at me with her cool, speculative eyes. The studio was empty, and in its centre a crude iron stove roared and spat over the wood that filled it. Thin whorls of smoke curled from the cracks in its belly and climbed upward to lay thin strata among the hammer-beams.

I turned to the woman questioningly, as much to face that detached scrutiny as to speak with her. She was standing by the door, still, leaning against the jamb with her hands behind her back, a position that thrust out the rounded angle of her shoulder and thigh. She looked at me as if she were considering the words she proposed to use, and for a moment I felt I was watching somebody load the magazine of a gun. Then, without speaking, she left me, walking with a swift and easy grace into the kitchen. I heard her voice calling there, and against my will I was moved by the gentleness and love in it.

I turned on my heel and looked about the studio, at the little jam-jar of wallflowers, holding within their velvet petals the memory of the hidden sun; at the litter of wood and canvas: at the pink curls of sandal-wood shavings brushed into a corner. There was an acrid

sting of dust in the air, the thin scent of turpentine, and the pleasant odour of burning wood.

On either side of the window were pinned cartoons of Mather's work; the figures hastily but expertly sketched in red chalk reminding me of those other sketches whose photostats were in my breast pocket. This was Mather's home, and it must have been the woman's attitude that made me feel an intruder so suddenly. It was as if I were admitting to myself that I had no business there, that the reasons that had brought me were spurious and trivial. I felt ill at ease, almost apologetic.

I brushed away the sensation, telling myself that this was one of hundreds of houses, hundreds of private lives which I had invaded so cavalierly. My passport to them all was my profession, and my profession, rightly or wrongly, believed it had entry to any man's house or any man's soul.

I walked across to a grand piano where it stood in a shadowed corner, its lid open. Music sheets were littered on the floor beside it, and I brushed them with my foot. They surprised me. They were all ballads, sentimental, even maudlin. I wondered whether they were Mather's choice or the woman's, and I thought of them both in the evenings, Mather at the keyboard, and the woman, her arm about his shoulder, singing to him. There was something pathetic in the picture.

I gently depressed a key with my finger, and the note rang in the quiet studio like a bell.

When they came, they came silently, or I had not heard their feet above my thoughts. I knew they were there only when the door squealed. I turned and went down from the piano toward them, holding out my hand. The woman came first and ignored me, walking across to the window and standing with her back to it,

her face in a green shadow. She left Mather alone in the doorway, and this she seemed to do deliberately, as if she were forcing him to take responsibility.

He did not take my hand either, and I let it fall to my side.

He was still wearing the shapeless trousers that curled over his carpet slippers, but he had pulled a thick seaman's jersey over his shirt. He had shaved, and his gentle, ugly head dropped cautiously over the rolled collar of the jersey. As he peered toward me he slowly pulled the spectacles from his nose and let them dangle from his hand. The white cat and its kittens pushed past his legs resentfully and marched into the studio, taking up their positions about the stove like a living illustration of the Mendel Theory.

"Good-morning, Mr. Mather," I said briskly, although the silent woman by the window unnerved me. "I was told you wished to see me again."

He looked toward the woman, appealingly I thought, and then when she did not speak he turned his face to me. He did not look into my eyes but beyond my shoulder, and then dropped his gaze to the spectacles in his hand, turning them over and over and watching the faint patterns of light they flung on the floor. He walked further into the room, passed me, shuffling ungainly in his slippers, until he stood by the table where the long stems of his brushes rose from an old pickle jar.

He licked his lips. "Yes?" he said. It was a question rather than an acknowledgment.

"Is there some comment you'd like to make now, Mr. Mather, now you've had time to consider it?"

He lifted his head and rubbed his chin with his hand, a heavy hand with dirt beneath the finger-nails. It was the hand that had painted the Annunciation, had flayed the rabbit, had touched in caress a woman's breasts. It

held my eyes, for those reasons perhaps, and I watched it as it left his face and paused in the air between us, as if he were trying to stop me from speaking. He licked his lips again and let the hand fall to his side. I looked toward the woman instinctively; she was the silent puppet-master of this comedy, I thought. But I could not see her face, only the outline of her head and shoulders, and beyond them the rich green of the wet garden.

"Perhaps you'd like to see the story again, Mr. Mather?" My hand moved toward my pocket.

"No!" His voice was thick, and he turned his back on me, shuffling toward the kitchen door unhappily. The woman's foot scraped on the floor and he paused, and returned.

"I can only ask this the way I feel it." He moulded his words before him with the slow movements of his hands. "I don't know if there is a correct way to do it, Mr. Ramsay. I don't know these things. I want to ask you not to publish that story."

I suppose I had expected this. "I can't promise you that, Mr. Mather."

"I say I don't know how to do these things." He did not look at my face. "If I should pay you anything, please tell me."

I laughed my astonishment. "That's an odd thing to say."

"*You can't publish that filthy story!*" Bitterly and angrily he swept an arm across his body. "You don't understand a thing about it. You and your dirty newspaper, what can you understand?"

The woman moved again at the window and I looked toward her. Still I could not see her eyes, but from the angle of her head I knew that she was returning my glance.

"I'm sorry," said Mather, "I didn't wish to be angry with you. I want you to understand. I'm sorry if I offended you by offering you money. I thought that was the way."

I knew that the woman must have suggested it, and the contempt and derision she must have felt for me when she made the suggestion burnt into me. "Whoever gave you that advice, Mr. Mather, knows very little about the Press. Money would have been no good, even if I had taken it. I can't promise you anything like this. I don't control my paper . . ."

"But you could tell them!"

"Tell them what, Mr. Mather? That the sketches are not yours?"

He thrust his hands into his pockets and stood there in the middle of the studio, looking down at his feet like a wretched and unhappy child.

"No," he said at last, "why should I deny them? They are mine. You think I am ashamed of them?" He looked at me sullenly. "You think I don't understand what you're thinking? All of you. You and your editor, and that man who employs you both to do his work."

Against the window the woman's body moved with a warning rustle, and Mather's expression, as his head turned toward her, was suddenly apologetic. I became angry with his round-shouldered humility.

"If you'd only take my advice, Mr. Mather, you'd be wise to make some sort of comment and let the story run its course. Believe me, it will be forgotten in a few days."

"Like toothache?" he sneered, and then with childish sarcasm, "I suppose it will hurt you more than it hurts me. Who's the man who started this?"

"If I knew I couldn't tell you," I lied; "it would be a breach of confidence."

“Confidence!”

What I said then was perhaps the most fatuous comment I had made. “We must protect our informants, Mr. Mather.”

“Who is there to protect me against a gutter-rag like yours?” he asked calmly.

“You’re in no need of it, are you, Mr. Mather?” Involuntarily I looked toward the woman, and he caught the significance of the glance. His face became white, and it was as though the muscles supporting the flesh of his cheeks had been abruptly severed. His jaw hung open in an odd, imbecilic manner, and his eyes filled with pain. When he spoke again his voice trembled. It was distasteful to think that this was Lionel Mather, who was a painter of genius, who held the Order of Merit.

“I could understand if you were doing this because you hated me, Mr. Ramsay. Because you wanted to destroy me. But you do it just to fill a few inches in your paper. You have no feelings at all for me. . . .”

It was melodramatic and it was emotional. I found it hard to accept his view because I could not believe in it. I was angry with him for making an issue of something that was just a story. I turned to go, more to escape my own feeling of discomfort than to be rid of him. He shuffled forward, caught my arm like a beggar in the street. I felt his long finger-nails through the sleeve of my jacket.

“Don’t go. Please don’t go yet. I’m not used to this sort of thing and I’m upset. I know it isn’t you, but you came to see me. . . . Should I go and see your editor?”

I thought of him in Cooper’s room, standing there on that rich carpet in his seaman’s jersey and slippers, waiting beyond the embattlements of Cooper’s cigar-smoke.

"Mr. Mather . . ." I began, but I couldn't tell him that perhaps the commissionaire would not let him beyond the front hall, even he, Lionel Mather.

"What would he say?" My silence irritated him. "He'd say I should go to hell, wouldn't he?" And then his voice became wistful. "Mr. Ramsay, can't you see this thing like I do? Why can't you?"

"Why did you do those drawings, Mr. Mather?" I tried to say that calmly.

"What sort of answer do you want?" His body twisted in violent contempt, his great arms flailing across the front of his jersey. "Something dirty you can print, something you can snigger about? What do you know about artists, what do you know about human beings, any of you? There isn't enough compassion in all of you together to be fair to the poor wretches you pillory every day."

It was so bizarre a description of us, so violent a denunciation that I must have smiled, for his body jerked forward and his mouth trembled, and I thought he was about to strike me.

"We're a newspaper, Mr. Mather," I said wearily. "You may not like us, but we print what people want to read. We cannot be responsible for the behaviour of the people who make the news we print."

I should have gone, I should have left them both. It is not a newspaperman's duty to argue the ethics of his profession. He is a journeyman, and he fulfils his obligations to his paper. But Mather had enmeshed me in the network of his bitter emotions, and if I stayed it was to extricate myself.

I wanted the woman to speak, as if that would break the odd, malevolent spell she seemed to have cast over both Mather and me. I could see Mather's torment, and I could not understand the relationship between them

that she should let him suffer so. The beads of sweat on Mather's cheeks had changed to little runnels, and he folded his arms across his chest and gripped his elbows with thick fingers. The pressure drew the blood from beneath the pale discs of his nails.

At last he said, "You know what this will do to me?"

I did not know. It seemed to me that other men had experienced worse at the hands of the Press than he. I had interviewed men who had brutally assaulted their children, embezzled their employers, attacked their wives, and I had seen that underneath their indignation lay a smug and vain approval of the notoriety that was coming to them. Perhaps that was what was wrong, men like that had set the standards of my judgment and left me unable to understand Mather. For the first time in my professional life I was conscious of a sneaking shame, and it angered me.

Mather's body swung round on its short, ugly legs, and he walked across to the woman at the window. Without knowing why, I could not look at them, feeling the same adolescent embarrassment one feels in the presence of lovers. I stared at the floor between my feet until his shuffling body came back to the centre of the room. In the silence I heard his breath, quick, panting, as if he had been running.

He said softly, "It will ruin me."

I made no comment and he said it again, his voice a little higher. "It will ruin me."

Of course I did not believe it. "Mr. Mather," I said, with the feeling that I was speaking to a child, pausing between my words. "You don't understand the position you're in. If we don't publish the story that doesn't mean it will be kept out of the Press. Some other paper will get it. You can't get every journalist to promise to ignore it. Because I know that sooner or later the

story will come out I must see that my paper gets it first."

He had not heard me. Half-whispering, he said again, "It will ruin me."

It was ridiculous, of course. We might have been writing a film script. "You're taking this much too seriously," I said, and, indeed, I thought he was. "People may talk about it for a day or so. All right, they'll laugh for a day or so. But ask them about it a week later and they won't be able to remember it. Ask anybody what the headline was in this morning's paper, and they couldn't tell you. Could you?"

"I told you," he said simply, "I don't read newspapers."

"You should have destroyed those sketches years ago," I told him impatiently. "I'm sorry this has happened, but there it is . . ."

"*You're* sorry!" He raised his hands slowly and wiped the sweat from his cheeks with a quick movement of both palms. He bit his lips. "*You're* sorry! I stopped reading papers like yours for one reason. I always knew they were foolish and dishonest. I never expected them to tell me the truth. But it was only when I realised that they were cruel and ungenerous that I could no longer read them. Do you think that any of you can express the soul of man in two sentences? A man is either good or bad, isn't he? Villains and heroes, that's how you divide up the world. You think that, *all you filthy muck-rakers* . . ." His voice rose to a scream.

I was not going to argue like this. "We can't kill a story because one person is afraid of the injury it might do him."

"Why not?" The excited vellication of his lips spattered my hand with spittle. "Have you no compassion?"

"We print the news as it comes, Mr. Mather," I said heavily, wondering why I did not take my hat and go.

"News?" His head jerked forward, and he almost jeered at me. "Where is the news? What good does it do the public to know about this? Where is the news?"

I knew it was not news. It was entertainment, but I said, "It *is* news, Mr. Mather. You've read the charges against you . . ."

"What charges? I haven't heard them. Nobody has told me. You come to me with this . . . this . . ." His body trembled and the saliva on his thick lips made them gleam unhealthily, ". . . this filthy innuendo."

I became quarrelsome then. "Look, Mr. Mather. I should not be here arguing with you. I am being generous enough to forget what you have been saying to me, how you have been behaving, even though I believe myself entitled to use what comments you have made in my story. You have admitted to me that those drawings are yours . . ."

We were close to each other when he interrupted me, each of us angry, each indignant, like squabbling school-boys.

"All right! All right!" He set off again, moving aimlessly about the room, chest rising and falling, his hands picking objects from the table and bookshelves, and replacing them "I'm not ashamed of them. Put that in. Put in that the world can go to hell, and you and your paper too! What do you or your editor know about artists?"

There was a simple answer to that. Cooper believed that people were not interested in art, only artists, and he was right. I was tempted to taunt Mather with this.

"What do you know about the soul of man? When did you last read your Bible, eh? Blessed are the pure

in heart. Thrice blessed are they who know they are pure in heart. But damned are the confused and unhappy, eh?"

I should not, I told myself, be here, a tennis ball between Mather and The Reader, victim of one's jealousy and the other's indifference.

Passion had made Mather articulate, and there was something evilly fascinating in listening to him. "Is life so simple to you? Good and bad and nothing more, and the bad are always news. God in Heaven, what fools you all are! I know your dirty minds. If Christ came again it wouldn't be the Resurrection and the Crucifixion that would interest you. No, you'd have a special article on the Immaculate Conception."

It occurred to me, with some amusement, that for a man who professed not to read the popular Press he had a shrewd understanding of its interests.

He swung away from me, his waving hands striking the jar of brushes on the table and knocking it to the ground. The jar broke and for a moment he looked at the fragments and the spilled brushes, and then he got down on his knees and began to pick them up. He examined each brush anxiously, placing it neatly on the table. He had forgotten me. He had suddenly forgotten me and was thinking only that his brushes might be damaged.

I got down beside him and helped him, and the action seemed to disperse our childish anger and enmity. When we had placed the brushes on the table I said to him as gently as I could, "Mr. Mather, don't think I am unwilling to understand. Leave this to me, will you? I promise you the story will do you no harm." I heard the words as if it were not I who was speaking. I heard the words, and although I meant them sincerely I also wanted to laugh at them.

Mather picked himself up from the floor. Passion had left his body trembling. He laid the remainder of the brushes on the table and turned away from me, shambling across to the window. I watched him and the woman as they turned their backs on me, and her arm went about his shoulder, and her hand stroked his hair.

I looked away from them, to the floor, to the cat softly pawing the presumption of her kittens. In the garden beyond the window the blackbird had returned to fill the mist with the clear music of its song. I decided that I should go, go before they knew I had gone, but I could not move, as if I were still under obligation to them.

Mather turned about, a comic, sadly comic, figure. His hair was thinner than it had at first seemed, now that the light was shining through it, and his skull beneath was round and small like a boy's. He passed his hand up and down his cheek, and when he spoke his words quivered with the restraint he placed on them.

"Mr. Ramsay, sir. I ask you again not to publish this story. It's not only that I believe it will do me harm, it is just that it will not be understood."

"Is there some way of explaining . . .?"

"No, there's no way you could publish."

"There's not much I can do then."

He moved about the room again in that loose, inarticulated manner that was at once irritating and pathetic. As he left her the woman leant back and folded her arms. I realised then that she was there, not to drive Mather forward by her unspoken will, but as a retreat to which he could return when he was grievously hurt. Her disturbing eyes were fixed on me. I knew this even when I did not look at her.

"Mr. Ramsay . . ." He began to plead with me. "I'm not a young man any more, and consequently I'm no longer resilient. A man of my age who has worked hard and tried to put into his work as much of what he believes as is possible, he doesn't like to be labelled as a hypocrite and know that every ignorant fool in the country is sniggering at him." He was only a yard from me now, staring at me with his opaque, watered eyes. "I'm being frank with you because I know you could help me if you wanted to. I respect your pride in your profession, sir, and your kindness in listening to me." The flattery irritated me, not because I believed it insincere but because I knew he meant it. "I like to be left alone, people can frighten me. . . ."

Sooner or later every newspaperman is encouraged in his boredom by being told that his work must bring him into contact with so many interesting people. . . . Oh, yes, it is a very interesting life. Why, only the other day I met Lionel Mather, you know, Mather the artist, he has the Order of Merit. On his knees almost, pleading with me not to publish some story we had about him. What was that? Of course we published it. The Press cannot be bribed or bullied, you know.

"I like to be left alone, Mr. Ramsay, but I'm proud of what I've done, and I'm not indifferent to success." He was flushing, and I could see he did not find it easy to say this. "I've been proud of my success and fame even though I like to enjoy it in privacy. Now you propose to do something that will kill me. My work, all of it, will become the excuse for a dirty joke. . . ." He saw my frown. "You don't understand?"

"I can't," I said impatiently. "It isn't up to me, Mr. Mather. We've spent too long already and still you don't see this. We have the story, I can't do anything about it."

"Why not?" he said in genuine surprise. "You're a free man. You don't like this story, I can see that. Why do you defend it?"

"I'm not defending it. It's a job I do. Two years ago I had to report the story of a man who burnt his young daughter with a poker. It was a filthy story but it was my job to report it. I didn't burn the child. My feelings didn't matter." I don't know why I told him this, for it was no argument, and I wondered what good it did me to remember it now.

He did not reply to it. His mouth was open and I watched him with distaste as the saliva gathered in the corner of his lips and dribbled down his chin. When he spoke he was hysterical. "No newspaper has the right to blacken my reputation."

"If you think that, Mr. Mather, you've every right to take us to court." Vaughan would curse me for saying that. "But we consult our own lawyers, you know."

"I could do that," he said with a sober intelligence that was unexpected. "I know I would win the action, but the damage would be done. People would not remember the evidence, or the result, and there are people who believe themselves wiser than the law. They would remember what was said about me, and that your paper said it. The publicity for you would be worth it, wouldn't it?"

"That's nonsense, Mr. Mather," I said. "Our integrity . . ."

The trembling of his head crept down his long arms until his fingers, hanging by his side, beat an irregular rhythm on his thighs. He said thickly, "What do I care for your integrity? Do you care for mine?"

"Only you can be responsible for that, Mr. Mather."

"No," he said. "No, you're wrong. It's the easiest thing to steal from a man."

I picked up my hat and coat. "There's nothing more we can say."

Then, as I looked at him with sudden and intense astonishment, he began to cry.

He stood before me with his arms hanging loosely, and he cried like a child at first, the tears running down his badly shaven cheeks and falling to the coarse wool of his jersey. Then, as we stood face to face, ugly sobs shook his shoulders, and his body seemed to break at the waist, his knees bending. He dropped his head into his thick and dirty hands and he moaned. The tears ran between his fingers and left them wet and shining.

I looked uncertainly toward the woman at the window. For a moment she remained there, staring at Mather, and in the shadow of her face I thought I saw her expression of cold reserve change to a wonderful compassion.

She walked slowly across to the weeping man, took him by the shoulders and held his head to her breasts. She did not look at me, but down at Mather's brown, untidy hair. Then she stroked his head gently and crooned to him, and led him away to the corner of the window. There she pulled up an old kitchen chair and tenderly lowered him into it. As he sat down, all the muscles of his body, except those of his hands which kept his fingers tightly locked against his face, seemed to lose their strength. His body crouched forward over his knees, and he began to sob again. The woman released his shoulder, bent and kissed his head, moving her lips through his hair as I have seen mothers do to their children.

Then she walked toward me resolutely. I seemed to hear her footsteps approaching for so long before she stopped a yard from me, as if she had come down a long passageway. Her face was white and firm, her nostrils

widened, and her lips drawn back over her splendid teeth in disfiguring anger. For a moment I thought she intended to strike me, and I must have withdrawn my head instinctively; there was a contemptuous expression in her eyes for a second before she turned away and went across to the garden door, opening it.

I shrugged my shoulders. I was stepping through the doorway into the damp when she spoke. Her voice was clear, precise and deeply musical, as always.

“*You swine!*” she said.

T W E L V E

I DROVE back to London recklessly, along roads that were drying in great patches of silver moisture. When houses began to break the serene countryside, slowly at first and then in serried regiments drawn up along the hills, I welcomed them as if they were allies. In such dormitory barracks dwelt our readers. Four million strong. Marching along, wherever we chose to lead them.

Let him cry! At that moment I think I hated Mather for no more than for making me doubt myself. It had been unscrupulous of him to try to dissociate me from my paper; his argument, his quarrel had not been with John Ramsay but with the *Sunday Standard*.

Why should they blame me?

I am certain, now upon reflection, that that was the only question I could ask myself on that drive. Why should they blame *me*?

And the woman . . . the woman had stirred emotions so strong and indeterminate that I could not, even had I tried, define them as anger, hatred, desire, or revulsion. She acted on me as a spoon stirring liquid in a glass; neither produces any chemical change in the other, yet the water is convulsed.

I drove over the sharp hump of Blackfriars Bridge, with the nose of my Morris pointing for a moment at the golden figure of Justice above the Old Bailey. The sunlight, which was struggling through the clouds to the north of King's Cross, glittered for a moment on the

extended, merciful arms of the figure, and then the car slipped down toward Farringdon Street and I turned it to the left.

The editorial floor of the *Sunday Standard* throbbed with a happy, comforting sound. About me was power, power and objective interest, a great newspaper. Already the paper was feeling the first pangs of labour. Discarded proofs of the feature pages lay in a yellow froth about Davies' desk, and the Features Editor himself, biting savagely at the stump of a ball-point, had twisted his face into an expression of tortured ferocity. He looked up as I passed, blinked uncertainly, and then called.

"John! Where can we get a picture of Mather's big job, the one that was bought for Church House?"

I stopped, my hands in my pockets, scowling at him. I had forgotten that the Mather Story was not my concern alone, that all departments according to their degree must take part in its gestation.

Probably the Irish editions would not carry the story at all. Twice already had the Catholic Church frowned on our moral callisthenics and swept us from the streets of Dublin. In Manchester it would get less than a third of a column, without pictures. Glasgow might not run it at all beyond the Lanarkshire editions.

Davies repeated his question petulantly. "Wake up, old man, for God's sake!"

"Try the Royal Academy Illustrated," I said. "Mather has the copyright anyway. But how does it concern you? Isn't that Grant's business?"

He pushed a hand into his stiff hair, and its resulting disorder made him seem more prehistoric than ever. "Everything comes to me eventually. There isn't a bastard here who seems able to do his own job. Where, did you say?"

"Do your own work, Davies. I just get the story. If you want me on the back bench to help you, see the Editor." It was churlish, and before I reached the reporters' room I was sorry.

In our own little enclave my colleagues greeted me with mock solemnity. "Hail!" said Robertson. "All hail to The Reader's blue-eyed boy!"

I had forgotten The Reader and his demand to see me, and I was surprised to realise that I no longer cared, but I grinned at them sheepishly. My telephone rang.

"Is that you, John?" said Vaughan's voice. "Where the hell have you been? Get in here quick!"

His office was lit against the trembling dusk of the ventilation shaft. His face was irritable and strained, a cigarette flickering in the corner of his mouth. He pushed the arm-chair toward me with his foot. "For God's sake!" he said, "you're a one story a week man, aren't you? And The Reader's been flapping for you since this morning. There's a car coming round at once. And what have you been saying to Davies?"

I slipped into the cool leather of the armchair. I felt tired, exhausted, and emotionless. As always, the rheumatic pains that throbbed in my legs made me feel old and dispirited. At that moment I cared nothing for The Reader or the *Sunday Standard*, but the mention of Davies angered me with petty spite. "I suppose that little prehistoric creature was on the phone to you before I reached my desk. Please, Mr. Vaughan, one of your reporters has been rude to me!"

"Stop it," he said sadly. "Don't take a larger size in hats because the Lord wants you. That's a road that goes in two directions."

"You're mixing your metaphors, Jack."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

He looked at me with an oddly charming twist of his mouth, and then his telephone rang. He grunted into it and slammed it back into the cradle. "All right, John. The car's out front. Hurry up!" He called to me as I stood at the door. "Good luck," he said, and raised an encouraging hand.

★ ★ ★

When The Reader was not at his dark house in Hertfordshire, or his farm in Huntingdon, or his villa at Mentone, or his château in the Ardennes, or his island in the Caribbean, when he was not directing his newspapers, his paper mills and his investments from these fox-holes, he was in his suite at the top of a great block of flats that made the trees in Berkeley Square below look like twigs.

I had heard of this home, how it had been cleverly designed to trap the thin London sun and blow it to such heat that rich palms grew in tubs on the little patio. A man could lie on a beach-chair there and look up at the sky, and but for the faint whisper of traffic below imagine himself on the Mediterranean. I had heard how The Reader lay there sometimes, stark naked, burning his body black, sucking in the sun through every pore of his old body and interviewing his staff without shame, even obtaining a certain dignity by confronting their formal clothes with his nakedness.

A lift took me to the top of the building, and the door of it opened to a little hall, across which was another door, white wrought-iron and faint green glass. I rang the bell and the door was opened by a little man in his shirt-sleeves, a naval pensioner obviously for his thick arms were heavily tattooed. He grinned.

“John Ramsay,” I said.

“Come in, sir. He’s expecting you. Been raising hell, on and off.”

He disappeared and I waited in the cool hall, where pot plants climbed the cream walls with dark green tendrils. My feet were almost ankle-deep in the carpet, and my senses were a little drugged by the rich scent of cooking. From one of the far doors a chef looked out at me once, his cap on the back of his head. He, too, grinned. I began to wonder where the joke was in my coming.

The man who had opened the door to me (I realised now that he was Harry, that almost mythical character who called The Reader’s editors by their Christian names, who was butler, valet, major-domo, bodyguard) beckoned me cheerfully. “This way, sir.”

He led me to a long, low-ceilinged room, one wall of which was all window, looking on to the squared patio, the palm trees, a heavy bush of bougainvillaea, and beyond that to the sky.

One never sees furniture in the first glance at a room, just as one never sees the bricks when confronted with a house. One sees only the design, or lack of it, and here was a room designed to impress yet somehow failing, as if the owner were determined to spite the designer. It was untidy; the chairs, and long dining-table, fought an unequal battle against a flood of papers and books that covered them and the floor.

I had not expected to see Chris Carter, but he was standing there with The Reader, at the far end of the room beside a little mahogany lectern. The Reader’s back was toward me when I entered, but Carter was facing me and he smiled. It was a smile of welcome, of encouragement and reassurance, and although there was also a touch of mockery in it I felt grateful for it.

The Reader turned slowly and studied me for a few seconds, his head lowered on his chest, and his pale, steady eyes looking up from under heavy brows. I was as curious about him as he was probably truly indifferent to me. I had seen his likeness a hundred times in photographs, and his parody in the cartoons in his own newspapers. I had heard him described many times by those who had seen him, even by Carter whose descriptive powers were amazingly succinct and exact. Yet the flesh, when first met, always confounds the illustrations previously studied.

He was a man of less than medium height, stooping so heavily that he seemed shorter still, and his round head with its thatch of white, untidy hair would have been too large for his shoulders had it not been for the breadth of his body and the simian length of his arms. He was brown-skinned, the tan intensified by the whiteness of his shirt. His blue suit had a full American cut, and a blue silk tie burnt with a fire of its own.

He walked across to me and said, "How do you do. Thank you for coming."

He held out his hand, not straight forward from his body but sideways, flipping it from him as if he had no further use for it, and when I took it in mine there was no firmness in his grasp.

"Sit down," he said, "I won't be long."

There was a faint Scots roughness in his tone that made me remember what I had forgotten. I was a countryman of his, and he was known to have the Lowlander's blind loyalty to race.

He went back to the lectern and stood there beside Carter, lifting sheets of paper to read and when he had finished letting them drift to the floor. Now and then Chris looked toward me with the same smile of en-

couragement, the same contradictory mockery in his eyes.

When The Reader had finished he turned away from the lectern. "Yes," he said to Carter and held out his hand in that diffident manner. Carter shook it, bent and picked the sheets of paper from the floor without humility and without loss of dignity. Before he closed the door he looked at me, thrusting out his lower lip in an expression of mock commiseration. It had the effect he intended, I suppose, for I suddenly realised that I was now alone with the most powerful man in Fleet Street.

The most powerful man in Fleet Street walked to the french windows and began to tug at the catch. It resisted him and he said, "*Damn!*" Instinctively I stepped across and released it for him, pushing open the window. The action broke the thin ice on which we had been standing. I had helped him, he had demonstrated a little weakness which I did not possess, and because of that I did not feel completely his inferior. It was not real, it was entirely calculated on his part, yet because of it I regained my self-confidence.

He walked before me on to the patio and sat down in a broad wicker chair, facing the sun, and waving me into another. The sun fell on to his brown face and he closed his eyes to it for a moment. It began to bite the back of my neck and I felt the sweat gathering in my arm-pits.

We sat there thus for some seconds, he perfectly still, with his hands hanging loosely, his head back. Then suddenly he jerked into life, lifting up his body with his elbows until his great head was sucked into his shoulders, and he stared at me with those wondrously pale eyes, no warmth in them, only a shrewd and observant curiosity.

"Are you a Scot? From where?"

I told him, and he nodded. "What was your father?"

"A minister, sir. He had a living in Argyll."

He nodded again. "Presbyterian?"

"Episcopalian, sir." And I wondered if that were a black mark.

He watched me, his lower lip moving gently against the upper. "What education have you had?"

I told him that too. I told him, when he asked, of my Army service, that I had one sister, where I lived. I was like an office boy applying for work.

"Are you a Communist?" he said, and a little surprised I shook my head.

"Socialist? Liberal? Conservative?"

I shook my head to all of them, and our mutual efforts to determine my politics failed. He seemed indifferent to this. "I don't trust Tory journalists," he said, and for a moment his heavy-lidded eyes opened a little wider and then returned to their customary reptilian stare of unemotional curiosity. I realised, too late to laugh, that he had joked.

"It doesn't matter to me what your politics are," he said, and held out his hand in a gesture of indifference. The skin of the palm was a startling white, and as soft as a child's. "I have no prejudice against men of any party. But if they work for me I like them to think of themselves as lawyers with a brief."

I nodded, and there was the faintest trace of a smile on his mouth as he went on. "Nobody I employ ever comes to me and says as the Ephraimites said to Ephraim: *Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?*" Humour crept into his cold eyes as he stared at me and said, "And, oh, how we should strike the Midianites!"

He leant back then and closed his eyes. I could now

feel the sweat forming under my collar. I was conscious of every muscle and bone in my body, and the resulting pain and discomfort was intense.

The silence went on, seemingly it would be endless. The traffic whispered below and the palm fronds moved against one another sibilantly. From nowhere, it seemed, there came to my mind the echo of the woman's voice when I left her an hour or so before, and it sucked the spirit from me. I wanted to run from it. Had she, I wondered, ever held this old man's head against her breast as she had held Mather's? For that matter had The Reader ever stood in need of compassion?

"Mr. Ramsay," the voice slipped from his lips firmly but gently. He did not open his eyes. "You must forgive an old man, but what salary do you receive?"

I told him, and he nodded slowly. I realised how paltry the amount must have seemed to him. Through the windows, into the room beyond, I could see the heavy sideboard with a regiment of decanters and bottles drawn up upon it. The sum I had named would not have bought a third of them. I wondered what his reaction would have been had he asked the same question of one of his clerks, of a dish-washer in the canteen, whether his cool, shrewd mind would have felt any emotion at all. Perhaps he was sitting there now, meticulously determining the sort of life such an income allowed me to lead. More probably he was deciding to ask Cooper whether I returned value for it. He was a wealthy man. Not long before we had included him in the list of the remaining few millionaires in this country. He probably felt nothing as he considered my twenty-one guineas. Wealth must be a refrigerator wherein a man's emotions are preserved but robbed of taste and warmth.

His eyes opened suddenly and the pupils were

directed at me. "Do you think you are worth more?"

He would not have believed me had I said "No," so I said "Yes."

He nodded. He had expected me to say that and the question had been wasted, for it had taught him nothing about me that he did not already know.

He got up, and I rose too. "Sit down," he said kindly, and he walked back into the room. He went to the side-board and I heard the bottles clinking. He came back and held out a glass to me as diffidently as he had held out his hand earlier. The glass was more than half-full of superlatively good whisky. He put his on a little table beside his chair and did not touch it again.

Once more there was a reflective silence, and then he took a piece of copy-paper from his pocket and gave it to me. "Read that."

I read it. It was a leader and I knew from its style that it was Chris Carter's, its heavy apostrophising, its violent emotions, its grammatical anarchy.

"What do you think of it?"

It was another trick question. I could say I was impressed by it. I could say how well it was written. He might believe that I sincerely meant these things, but he could never be sure. So a little recklessly I told him that I did not like it, and I apologised to Carter under my breath. He asked me why, and I found myself arguing against the policy of his newspapers, damning Carter's condottiere command of English. He nodded and took the paper from me.

"That was written by my best leader-writer." There was no need for him to tell me that.

I believe he thought I was confused and embarrassed, for he went on with charming courtesy. "I value your opinion," he said.

We sat there silently again, and I began to wonder whether the Mather Story was to be mentioned at all.

The silence that surrounded us must have been natural to him, for he was the master of the situation and he could command silence as he wished. I would not speak until he addressed me. I was there to answer questions, I could not inspire conversation. He sighed softly at last, and laced his firm brown fingers across his stomach.

"I may want you to write some pieces for me. Would you wish to do that?" He raised an eyebrow and stared at me from beneath it like the man lifting the canopy of a tent.

I wanted to say no. I wanted to say that I was happy enough, or had been happy enough until the Mather Story. Happy to be his simple journeyman, gathering news for him and drawing my salary without the discomfort of a conscience. I wanted to say that I did not wish to carry a hatchet for him into his political battles.

I said, "Yes, sir."

"I don't want you to write anything that might not be your own opinion," he said calmly, his eye fixed for a moment on a lazy cloud above us. Then he looked at me with an impassive expression. "And if there's anything you haven't made up your mind about we can discuss it. I will talk to you and between us we can decide what should and what should not be said."

I wondered if the talking was to begin now, and, if it was, what I was to say. New, unexpected conflicts of spirit and conscience had somehow risen inside me since that visit to Mather, feelings I did not yet understand and I wished for time to consider them. Perhaps he saw some of this confusion in my face for he said gently:

"I don't ask men to change their opinions when they join me. I ask them only to meet me on common ground. That is the evil in the world to-day, a refusal to find common ground for debate." It was such a banal understatement, such feuilleton philosophy that I could not believe he meant it, and perhaps he did not. But his face was serene and unsubtle. "Some of the best men in Fleet Street have worked with me on this understanding. You know them." He named them and their names were like sonorous bells ringing. He had a capacity for bringing out the music of words.

"Some of them," he said, and chuckled unexpectedly. "Some of them say some very naughty things about me now."

And then we were silent again. The sweat, with the sun full on my back, was now running down my spine, and there was an ache in my neck. Perhaps I should have moved my chair out of the direct onslaught of the sun, but he was so obviously enjoying it that such an action on my part would have seemed an insult.

"Are you married?"

"No, sir."

"And you would be willing to travel?"

I agreed before I thought of my mother and the chain that kept me to her and to London. Such was the extraordinary magnetism and dominance of the man that at that moment I might have agreed to cut my throat. I was about to correct myself, to say no, I could go nowhere, when I remembered that, after all, my mother was to go to Mary, and that I was to be free. But the sense of liberty that rose up in me was stifled suddenly by a darkness that came from within my emotions. Once more I heard an echo of that last interview with Mather, and the silent contempt of the woman.

Cautiously, while The Reader sat there with his eyes

closed, I glanced at my watch. I had been with him ten minutes only. It had seemed an hour with these long intervals of silence. I tried to view him dispassionately, but his position, his power kept confusing my judgment. The impression I received was of a paradox, of a completely determined ruthlessness that was sheathed in benevolent geniality. The man was not passing the time of the day with me. Behind the lowered lids of his eyes, within these balls of silence he was considering me and my abilities as intently as if he had me beneath a microscope. Yet at the same time he was unconsciously honouring the rôle that his reputation had given him, the unpredictable, eccentric, dynamic, and Machiavellian old man of the Press. The Mather Story may have been the cause of him sending for me, but it was now obvious to me that he had no intention of mentioning it, and silence on his part was an inferred instruction to me to forget that he had ever been connected with it.

He moved again in his chair, opened his eyes and rose. Once more I rose too, thinking the interview was over, but he motioned me back into my chair with his hand. He walked into the room and picked up the trumpet of a dictaphone. He flicked a switch and spoke into the mouthpiece with quite a new tone. It barked, it was sharp, dictatorial, incontrovertible.

"Mr. Cooper! I have spoken to Mr. Ramsay and I have enjoyed my chat with him. Maybe we'll talk again and he will do some pieces for me. You will see that his salary is increased to thirty guineas a week. If it is not our custom to pay our staff in guineas you will make it thirty-one pounds."

He put down the mouthpiece and returned to me.

I said, "Thank you, sir," like a schoolboy, but there was little satisfaction inside me. Then he surprised me.

“How is your mother in her illness?” he said, and I knew that he had known all about me before he sent for me. “What is wrong with her?”

I told him and he nodded, and then he said. “I have read some of your work for the paper. You should use shorter sentences.”

Once again a silence, while a bee, which must have been a pioneer among all insects to fly to this height, hummed lazily among the bougainvillaea.

Harry came to the window and coughed. He was wearing a white barman’s jacket now and he grinned at me encouragingly over The Reader’s shoulder. He was carrying a green telephone in his hand, and he said something softly that I did not hear. A faint frown passed quickly above The Reader’s eyebrows, but he took the telephone from Harry, put the handpiece to his ear, and rested the cradle at his feet.

He answered the telephone as I have seen some old women answer it, receiver held away from the ear, clutched tightly in one hand. It was strange that he should appear to be so unfamiliar with the instrument.

“Yes?” he said, that same flat, uncommunicative monosyllable.

There was a rattling of the diaphragm. It was a woman’s voice, and the tone of it, distorted though it was by the metal and separated from me, told me who it was. It was angry, appealing, yet still with her arrogant dignity. The expression in The Reader’s face did not change.

“Yes,” he said at last, “I have spoken to him.” For a moment his eyes rested on me, and then he closed them against the sun. The angry voice beat against the receiver, rising in volume. The sun shone brilliantly on the faint freckles of The Reader’s hand.

“I don’t agree with you.” He said that calmly, but

there was a note of warning in his voice which the woman may or may not have sensed. "I promised you no more than that."

I heard the woman laugh humourlessly, and then her voice seemed to change, grow softer, and in answer to it there was a faint nostalgic expression in The Reader's eyes that passed quickly.

"That was a long time ago."

Again a sharp question from the telephone.

"I have decided to leave the decision to my editor. I interfere with my editors as little as possible."

The telephone rattled hysterically.

"No," said The Reader. "I am sorry." He put the receiver back on its cradle and looked at me as if I had not heard him.

He knew that I had guessed it was she, and perhaps he was wondering what effect the conversation had had on me. I do not think he could have known, for I was not sure myself. In my mind there was a picture of the woman, sitting there with the telephone still in her hand, and looking at it. I thought of what the call must have cost her in self-respect and dignity, and I thought of her loyalty to Mather, to that wretched, unhappy little man. But these thoughts were without accusation. Perhaps I thought too of the thirty guineas a week I had been offered and the little pieces I was to be writing. The sun was relentless on the back of my neck.

He rose from his chair and this time he did not motion me back into my seat. He held out his hand with that sideways flick, and I took it. His grasp was now firm, and he drew me into the room. There he released me, turned his back on me and I knew I was dismissed. He went across to a radio gramophone, lifted the needle, turned a switch, and lowered the needle to the record.

Faintly, beautifully, a piano began to play "Sheep May Safely Graze", and never before had I realised that there could be times when this fragile melody would sound bizarre and trivial.

As I left I looked back at him. He was standing before the gramophone, his great head down on his chest, his smile pleasantly appreciative.

THIRTEEN

“**H**I!” said Vaughan genially when I entered his room. His earlier irritation was gone, and he was wearing his coat. He stood up and buttoned it, and then rubbed his hands. “Lock the door, John, and we’ll have a private chat.”

I knew what he meant, and when I had turned the key he bent over the drawer of his desk and brought out a bottle of beer and two glasses.

“*Salud!*” he said. He had used this greeting ever since he had read “For whom the bell tolls”.

We drank, and when he asked me what had happened I told him, humorously, although I could not see it as a joke. I told him about the new salary offered me, the instruction to “write little pieces”, and we both laughed condescendingly at The Reader’s choice of phrase. But I did not tell him how I had felt, how I was feeling, nor did I tell him of that bitter, appealing telephone call from the woman.

“Good lad, John,” he said, “let’s finish the bottle.” And we drank again, although the taste of beer in the afternoon has always revolted me. “I knew you’d make it, wasn’t worried for a second. You’re the best we’ve got.”

It was untrue, of course. Llewellyn and Robertson, for example, were infinitely better newspapermen than I would ever be. But the praise flattered me, the more because I knew Vaughan was letting his liking for me override his judgment. Yet while flattering me his words left me vaguely dissatisfied.

"Bloody good thing, this, John!" He was delighted, and I was touched. He looked at my face sharply. "Now what's the matter, what the hell's the matter? You look as pleased as if the old man had fired you." He frowned. "Mother trouble?"

"Not mother trouble, Mather trouble."

He took his cigarette from the ash-tray and held it before his face, between thumb and forefinger. The smoke, caught in the up-draught from the windows, drew itself up in a tenuous line to the ceiling, and broke there in faint ripples. "I don't get it. . . . Oh, yes. You went down to see him again. What happened?"

The telephone rang before I could answer and Vaughan snatched it up irritably, plucking his moustache as he listened. "All right," he said at last, "go back and see him again. I don't care. Go back and see him again."

I think, when Vaughan dies, there could be no better epitaph for him, or for any News Editor for that matter, than those six words.

"You know," I said, when he replaced the telephone, "I believe there's no more to being a News Editor than knowing how to say *Go back and see him again!*"

He did not smile. "What happened about Mather?"

"He cried," I said simply.

At first Vaughan frowned, then he sat down at his desk, leant on his fat elbows, and began to smile. "He *what?*"

"He cried. Have you ever seen a middle-aged man cry?"

"My father used to cry every Saturday evening."

"It's no joke."

"All right," he said gently, and the smile slowly left his face. He rubbed his hands together impatiently. "I didn't make him cry, did I?"

"No. I did."

He swore, jerking his head sideways in disgust. "John!" Into that one syllable he put a contemptuous dismissal of all that he believed was disturbing me.

I suppose I became angry with him because I had failed to impress him, and that is why I acted theatrically. I had had no lunch, and the beer had acted upon me quickly. I took my diary from my pocket and flicked the pages.

"While we're drinking," I said, "here's a toast that's more apposite than *Salud*! I quote: *Jack Trueman doth you to understand that falseness and guile have reigned too long, and truth hath been set under a lock and falseness reigneth in every flock.* End quotes."

Vaughan put the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, tilted his head, and looked at me with bewildered amusement. "What's that all about?"

"It was carved on a stone in the village church, near where Mather lives. It seems to fit us."

"All right," said Vaughan. "So Mather cried. Tell me why and I'll cry too. Or if you don't want to tell me let's get back and bring out a newspaper."

"Now you're talking like Humphrey Bogart," I said. "Do we all need to act like film stars?"

"Why did he cry?"

"He cried because we're going to publish the story."

It seemed ridiculous when put like that, and I was not surprised when Vaughan began to laugh. He opened his mouth suddenly and his cigarette fell and bounced on his blotter with a little flurry of sparks. The ventilation shaft flung back the raucous vigour of his laughter.

"*Jesus Christ!*" he said, and he took off his glasses and wiped the palm of his hand over his smooth face. There were tears in his eyes, but when he saw my face he stifled his amusement. "All right, John. Now what?"

"No more. Except I was also called a swine."

"By Mather? What does that . . ."

"By his model."

He pushed his tongue into his cheek and chewed it. Obviously he wanted to laugh again, but he sighed resignedly. "What's the matter, you're not the first reporter to get the rough edge of somebody's tongue?"

"I'm probably the first to feel he deserved it."

Vaughan's contempt and impatience were exhaled slowly from his lips in a long-drawn exclamation. He pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and nervously scratched the hair on his forearm. "Don't be such a damn fool. I'd think you'd been overworking if it weren't for the fact that nobody overworks on this paper but me. What's the real trouble? Has your mother been upsetting you?"

"For God's sake, Jack, get off the subject of my mother. Try and bend that Olympian mind to an understanding of what this means to me."

"O.K." His fat hands were waved defensively before his face, and he pretended to crouch away in terror. I rose in disgust.

"Sit down," he said sharply. "Who have you told this to? Just me? Well keep quiet about it unless you want to become a joke. It's a good story, but did you expect Mather to *laugh*? It'll do him no harm." He folded his hands as if there were nothing more to be said. "Like another drink?"

"No."

He put the bottle in the waste-paper basket, washed the glasses with water from his carafe, and threw the water out of the window. We heard it striking the bottom of the well.

He looked at my face and sighed again. "God help us," he said. "All right, so you've got a problem. There

aren't problems enough in the running of a news-room without reporters worrying about ethics, eh?" I saw that he was tired, and suddenly confused, and I felt sorry for him.

"There's no problem, Jack. But I'd like you to kill the Mather Story."

I thought he was about to laugh again, but instead he pushed the back of his hand against his lips. "What's the matter with you? I was going to give you a by-line on it; I'll keep it out if you don't want people to know you did the story."

"That's no good. Can't we kill it?"

He shook his head in bewilderment. "You know that's a crazy thing to say. We can't leave it for the competition to get. Good Lord, John! The story's a joke, not a tragedy, a natural page lead if the legal eagles let us run it. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know," I said. "Don't you think I'd like to know? But this seems to mean a hell of a lot to Mather, and I can't see why we should crucify him for a page lead."

"Oh, to hell with Mather," said Vaughan angrily. "You've got a touch of the sun." He was ill-tempered, moving the pencils and paper on his desk aimlessly, pulling heavily on his cigarette and plucking it from his lips to stare at me with narrowed eyes. "Tell me the truth. Are you really serious?"

"Of course I'm serious," I said, returning his anger. "Would I come in here with a request like this if I wasn't? It's the first time in my life I've ever asked a paper to kill a story I've done for them."

"There shouldn't even be a first time," he said coldly. "You're paid to do a job, you aren't asked whether you'd like to do it. And if you don't like the job you can leave it."

"Don't say that," I told him.

We heard the handle of the door turning. It was jerked irritably and I half-rose. Vaughan said, "Leave it, leave it until we get this thing settled." Footsteps retreated down the corridor.

Vaughan spread his hands on the desk and stared reflectively at his well-manicured nails. The dull scarlet of his tie stained his white shirt. He looked clean, confident, and yet a little unhappy. "You know we won't kill it," he said at last. "Not just because you ask. Why ask then?"

"I have to. And I'll speak to Cooper if you won't."

"Walter won't like that. Don't upset him. Why upset anybody for that matter?"

"Why upset Mather?"

"Oh, *God!*" he said wearily. "Let's forget Mather and his dirty pictures. I'm tired of the story anyway. But you've just had a break with *The Reader* . . ."

"To hell with that, and the paper!"

He flushed. "O.K. Put it in a memo to me."

"I know what would happen to a memo like that. You'd spike it and we'd start all over again."

"What are you going to do if we don't kill it? Resign?"

I stood up. "That's the second time," I said. "I resign now."

Perhaps I had not wished to say it. It would be wrong to suggest that Vaughan had put the thought in my mind, but had he not mentioned it I do not know whether I would have resigned. As I spoke, however, I felt a peculiar and unexpected lightness of spirit.

Vaughan would not accept it seriously. He laughed, pulled off his spectacles and dusted them with his handkerchief. "Sit down, you fool," he said. "Take the rest of the afternoon off, I'll cover up for you." I shook my

head. "Look, John," he pleaded, "I don't have to argue with you, and God knows why I do. The odds are the story won't be used anyway, the lawyers will probably kill it. Why not wait and see?"

"So the lawyer kills it," I said, arguing with myself. "If that happens it won't be on principle but because we're too frightened of a writ. We'd crucify Mather if we thought we could get away with it."

"What principle, for God's sake?" shouted Vaughan. "You're in a hell of a mood."

I fought against the words I used. "You have my resignation."

"How is it that they never got you to give evidence before the Press Commission?" he sighed. "You're the last person I expected to develop a conscience over a thing like this."

"Why the last?" I asked curiously.

"I don't know. You seemed level-headed. You seemed to take the job for what it is, something that fills the belly. Look, Walter wanted to see you when you got back from The Reader, that was probably him at the door. Don't go in there like this."

"He's got to know."

"You great stupid ass!" he shouted. "You can't even see that I'm trying to save you a headache. Look, John, do this for me. Wait until next week. Think about it. Will you do that, old boy?"

"What's the point? Will you hold the story until I make up my mind?"

"No, and we won't kill it if you resign. And I warn you if you resign now, I'll move hell to run the story and put your by-line on it. See how your conscience stomachs that." He was standing now, leaning forward and resting his knuckles on his desk. "If you do a crazy thing like this Walter and The Reader will make certain

that the rest of the Street knows you welshed on a story. Nobody wants a reporter who can't be relied upon, who discovers a deformed conscience half-way through the job." He began to plead again, and it was his pleading I feared most because it was based on a genuine liking for me. "It isn't a tragedy, John, not the Mather Story. But, by God, you'll find what sort of tragedy you'll be in when you try to get another job. How are you going to look after your mother then?"

It was an adroit appeal, but it failed. "I've no responsibility there any longer. My sister is to take care of her."

"All right," he said in resignation. "Go ahead and be a fool. Write out your memo and send it in to me. I'll pass it on. While you're about it, write a long letter to the *New Statesman* telling them how your conscience suddenly revolted against working for the bold bad *Sunday Standard*. Appeal to the Street to come out on strike and see what a joke that'll be. This is the wrong century for martyrs."

"I won't embarrass you. It's my own personal problem."

"Like hell, it is! It's mine too." He slumped down in his chair. "You're going to make me look a fool."

He was genuinely worried, and because I liked him, because I saw that I had upset him, I compromised. "I'll leave it until Tuesday," I said, and his smile of pleasure wounded me, for I knew that he believed that by then I would have changed my mind.

I went back to the reporters' room and I stood by the window, looking down at the river. The sun, after its brief appearance, had passed behind a bank of clouds beyond Westminster. The river water threaded the dark wharves with metal and lipped over gently in its passage

seaward. To the east I saw the woollen steamer smoke of vessels leaving the Pool.

With the spate of my anger running dry I was suddenly frightened by the decision I had made. I fought down the hope that the lawyer would kill the story, because I knew that if that happened it would weaken my determination. In all the confusion of my thoughts I had only this one firm substance to which I could cling: my resignation.

I looked about the room with maudlin nostalgia, the mocking headlines on the wall, pasted there because of their ambiguity; the long ribbons of the galley-proofs moving in the draught; the idle typewriters, the thick, warm, comforting atmosphere. Penny, the typist, looked up at me and smiled her insipid, naïve smile.

I remembered that Cooper wished to see me, and I went along to his office. He was standing by the broad windows, balancing himself gently on his toes, watching the coming rain which had already sent urgent out-riders against the glass. He nodded to me and stared at me weakly above the top of his glasses. I waited.

He speared a proof on a spike near the window and sat at his desk, smiling at me with an amiable superiority. "Well," he said, "did you see his lordship? What happened?"

I told him, and he listened, his eyes fixed on my face reflectively as if he were less interested in what I was saying than what I might be thinking. When I finished there was a brief silence which he ended by saying, "He seems pleased with you. Don't think this necessarily changes your future, though, laddie. It's a chance, but a paper needs reporters more than it needs political writers." There was a peculiar bitterness in his tone.

"When does he want to see you again?" I told him that I did not know, and he nodded. "You'll hear from

him. Let me know what happens. You'll go on doing your job here until I hear otherwise." He looked down at his finger-nails. "The only good journalist," he said, almost to himself, "is one who goes out in the street and gets his story. It's what I built this paper on."

I sat there uncomfortably, feeling that I was somehow deceiving the man. When he looked up at me again it was to study my face with an odd intentness, as if he distrusted the thoughts in my mind.

Mrs. Clarke came in, bringing with her the same scent of hyacinths and the dazzling whiteness of her piqué blouse. Her voice was crisp, and she did not look at me. "His lordship is on the line."

"Put him through." Cooper reached for the white telephone on his desk, and stared at me. I rose to go. He gestured me back into my seat with his hand and smiled with an oddly unexpected kindness. My status had been altered.

Cooper's voice, as he spoke to The Reader, changed subtly. It was not obsequious, it still retained something of its brusque arrogance, yet there was subservience in it.

After he had said, "Yes, sir?" I heard the sharp, uncompromising rattle of The Reader's voice, and the room became charged with his dynamic personality. The expression on Cooper's face was blank, and he stared at me above the mouthpiece of the telephone. I do not remember what he said to The Reader but when he put down the receiver he said to me, "Did his lordship mention the Mather Story to you?"

"No, he didn't."

"Well, we shan't be using it. Tell Vaughan." His grey cheeks were chilled by a smile. "Don't worry. A good story is a good story whether we use it or not." I did not believe this any more than did he. No story is

good until it is printed. "The Mather Story has certain legal difficulties. You went to see Mather to-day, what did he say?"

I could say nothing, and he frowned at my hesitation. "Trouble?"

"He wanted us to kill it."

Cooper did not laugh as Vaughan had done. He nodded indifferently and then said with the faintest touch of indignation: "He ought to have thought of that before he did those drawings. People always want their names kept out of the paper. When I was a young reporter at the courts people used to come down and offer me half-crowns to keep their case out of the paper. It always pleased me," he added with a touch of malice, "to make special mention of people like that. There are always people who think they can bribe the Press. Did he threaten us with a writ? No? Just as well; I shouldn't like the little wretch to think we didn't publish because we're afraid of him."

He felt in his pocket-case for a cigar, examined it casually and then put it into his mouth, leaving it there unlit. It jerked spasmodically as he dismissed me. "Run along, laddie. See what Vaughan has for you to do. . . ."

FOURTEEN

CARTER was alone at the bar of the Press Club, a flat Turkish cigarette unlit between his lips, his hands cupped about a glass of ginger ale. I paused in the doorway to look at him. He was a man who carried his own solitude with him, a glass globe that insulated him from others and held him in an emotional vacuum. The dark, red-faced swirl of men in the bar, broad of shoulder and of stomach, might not have been there, so solitary did Chris seem. His thin face, with its ascetic cheek-bones and its expression of aloof meditation, was pale against the brown background of kegs. His body had a lazy and natural elegance that was unconsciously insolent in manner. The white triangle of his pocket handkerchief splashed his dark suit. When I gently placed a hand on his shoulder he looked up at me without expression at first and then he slowly smiled.

"Welcome," he said, with peculiar emphasis, and although I knew he was referring to my new association with our master I did not respond.

"Is Sean here?" I wanted to talk to them both.

"He's in the box outside, phoning his lineage through to Ireland. Pennies and tuppences. I wonder he does it, it's more trouble than it's worth."

"He's not a two-thousand-a-year man, Chris. How do you expect him to live? Like you?"

"He's single. No children, no wife."

"He had a wife once, did you know?" I told myself that I might be betraying Sean's confidence, for only

after a wild night of drinking a year ago had he told me this about himself.

"I know," said Carter calmly. "I suppose he told you as he told me, when he was drunk. There's little more embarrassing than a drunken man's confidences; they make you feel you are gaining them on false pretences. He divorced her, or she divorced him, anyway the Pope wouldn't approve of it at all. How do you think Sean will behave in Hell, John? Will he send Ireland his lineage from there?" Carter smiled at me indulgently.

"He'll be in good company. Hell will be full of ex-communicated Irishmen. There'll be so many of them that the Pope will have to send a Legate to the Devil. Anyway, most of us will be there with him."

Carter ran his finger round the edge of his glass and looked up at me with amusement in his eyes. "You were a success with The Reader."

"Thank you. Aren't you going to buy me a drink?" When the door of the billiard-room swung open a little bubble of laughter spun out from the shaded lights, bursting along the bar. There were more men there now, standing defensively behind their glasses, talking loudly, boldly, confidently. They were men with positions in life, I thought, stout men, stout-crusted men, the Fourth Estate. Their predecessors wrote polemics in taverns in this same street, and if *they* had consciences they pocketed them along with the guineas they were paid.

But I could not sustain this spurious cynicism, and when Conlon came in and hugged us both affectionately I returned his warm smile.

"The gentleman who ordered the last round can add another pint to it," said Sean. "And who might the wake be for?"

"For all our souls," said Carter. "John has been

elevated to The Reader's favour and wants to drown his embarrassment."

"I heard about that," said Sean, grabbing my hand, "but if you're going to be bloody-minded about it I'm going to the pictures. Don't let Chris's jealousy upset you. You ought to celebrate."

"Not to-night," I said, "or maybe yes, particularly to-night. I want some advice from you both."

Conlon smiled at me innocently above the edge of his tankard, but Carter fingered his tie and said with a faintly malicious smile, "If it's any help to you, Vaughan spoke to me half an hour ago. He thought that since I'm your friend I might talk sense into you. . . ."

"The hell he did! Then I suppose you think I'm a fool too?"

"We're all fools," said Carter, and looked up at Sean. "Dublin papers please copy."

"All right," I said. "Lecture me."

He drew in the smoke of his cigarette. "If we're going to play confidences, the Press Club is hardly the place for it. Let's go."

"I've only just come," said Sean indignantly, "you must have one with me. What's all this about, anyway?"

But neither of us answered him, myself, I suppose, because Carter's mockery had unbalanced me. The little bar was a warm sanctuary and walls of contentment surrounded us. We talked shop. All about us men were talking shop and their robust self-satisfaction was a great bulwark against the world beyond Salisbury Square. There was some bitter comfort, too, in keeping my problem to myself.

"What's the matter with you?" said Conlon at last. His eyes were misted. He had probably been drinking since early afternoon. He pulled his tie away from his collar and thrust his hands in his waistband.

Carter laughed silently. "He has a problem. He's resigned from the *Standard*. Now that's something you or I wouldn't do, isn't it, Sean?"

"I'd resign to-morrow," said Sean loyally, but he had not understood.

"But not for ethical reasons."

"Ethics, is it?" said Conlon. He was certainly drunk enough to play the comic Irishman, and he pronounced the word as *attics*. "What's that?"

"It's not a joke, you idiot!" I said with cold anger, and then regretted the tone when I saw the expression of hurt embarrassment on Sean's face. Carter was undisturbed. He eased himself gently on his stool and raised his glass significantly to the barman. From the other end of the bar a gale of laughter swept up from a group of men and beat against the windows. Conlon stared at me like a hurt animal, his eyes blinking, his affectionate, likeable face suddenly sad. Yet, to see it, made me more angry.

"You're in a hell of a state to talk to," I said. "You won't understand a damn thing!"

"Being sober wouldn't help him to understand," said Carter. "Start from the beginning, if we must hear it."

"Where is the beginning?" I escaped into evasion. "In the labyrinth of The Reader's brain, in Cooper's imagination, in our own indifference?"

"Sean got off at the last station," said Carter, smiling at Conlon's puzzled frown. "It begins in you, John."

"Let's have the facts," said Sean thickly.

I told them, and when I had finished they said nothing, and the silence seemed to amuse Carter, for he grinned at me across it.

"Forgive me," said Sean with a heavy and comical dignity, "I don't understand this. Will someone explain it to me?"

But I turned to Carter. "Let's have your opinion."

He shrugged his shoulders. "If you meant what you're doing you wouldn't want my opinion. If anything I think you're a damn fool to worry about the ethics of this profession so late in the day. Is this the worst story you've ever handled? Is this the first time you should have resigned on principle? You're just the employee of The Reader . . ."

"A lawyer holding a brief," I quoted.

"So he told you that too," smiled Carter. "It's a fallacious argument, of course, but it's balm on the soul."

"*Your* soul!"

"And yours too, in time," he answered easily, and then went on more sharply, "I'm irritated by journalists who suddenly discover a point of principle. The men who wake up one day and flagellate themselves by shouting *peccavi*."

"Latin," nodded Conlon gravely.

Carter ignored him. "They're as bad as the men who never wake up, who go through Fleet Street as jolly good fellows and write a book of sentimental lies at the end of it all." He looked at me with mocking sympathy. "We're only servants, but every so often our own feelings and beliefs get involved with what we're doing. If we are good servants we sacrifice our principles, not the master's. We all do it, and we aren't villains. We are fairly honourable men. We pay our debts, we don't beat our wives."

I realised now that I wanted to quarrel with him because the real argument I was having was with myself. He was astute enough to voice the thoughts that were in my own mind. He did not attempt to defend our profession, he attacked it cynically and thus made it appear impregnable.

"Would you be so indifferent," I challenged him, "if you weren't getting two thousand a year?"

"Perhaps not," he said. "Is it the fact that your salary has now gone up to fifteen hundred that worries you? The duties of a highly paid courtesan are the same as those of a street-walker, you know. More finesse is expected of her, that's all." And all I could feel was a banal curiosity to know how he had discovered my salary.

Conlon's agitated, waving hands broke the air before our faces, and we turned to him, almost in relief.

"They're dirty sheets we work for, all right," he said unhappily, "but there's more to the profession than them. I'd be much happier in Belfast, writing pars like *The funeral of Father Aloysius Rafferty took place yesterday. Among the mourners were . . .* Dull stuff, but hell, how accurate!"

We laughed at him. Carter put his arm on Conlon's shoulder and let it rest there, but his eyes looked at me. "Sean keeps telling us that he would be happier in Ireland, but he never goes home. There's a lesson for us."

But Sean was not drunk enough to be patronised. He shook off Carter's arm, his face red and his lips wet. "I'll go home," he said, "I'll go home to-night. I can catch the Irish Mail. Who's resigning? You don't want to resign, John. You ought to resign. Let's both resign. Let's go and live in Connemara or Moidart and write. What are you resigning for, Johnny. . . .?" he cried unhappily.

I knew that he was too drunk to understand, and I knew that if I went over the matter again it would sound trivial and absurd, but the genuine concern in his eyes made me tell him again. I told him what had happened and why I should resign, but I did not ask him the question that was in my mind. *Am I right?*

"*Parturiunt montes . . .*" said Carter when I had finished. "Now I must go home."

"More Latin," Conlon complained. "All the time you quote Latin tags, and I know you only look them up in the Oxford Book of Quotations." He turned away from Carter and gripped my arm, holding it more brutally than he realised. "You aren't going to resign for that? Maybe it's a dirty job, but it's only a joke."

"Oh, he'll resign," said Carter impatiently, "and in a week he'll regret it."

I felt suddenly alone. There is, it seems, no greater loneliness than to discover one's friends out of sympathy, and driven by that lack of sympathy into open opposition.

I shouted angrily, "You're so damn certain about that, aren't you?"

Along the bar remonstrative faces were turned toward us. "*Here, steady on, old chap!*"

"For God's sake, let's not fight about it, John," said Carter, and then went on more kindly. "Face it, you'll find no one to sympathise with you, and you'll not get either Sean or myself to say you're right, if that's what you're after. Cooper will make you out to be a crank, or a Communist. The real point is that you've already taken out your indentures in hypocrisy. You didn't resign because of that violent leader Cooper wrote against Strachey the other week. You didn't resign when the *Standard* started that appalling strip cartoon. Why now, because of Mather? Let's forget it." He slipped down from the stool and began to button his jacket.

"I've had enough," I said. "Perhaps you're right about the other things, and the Mather Story is just the last. I'm sick of the pornography, the lowest common denominator in intellectual argument. I'm tired of

seeing important stories killed because they are not the sort that sell papers. I'm tired of the fact that whether we try to be conscientious newspapermen or not we're still just hatchetmen in The Reader's political battles. I'm tired of hearing the Union talk about a professional code of conduct and then watching myself and all the rest of us breaking it . . ."

"*Ach!*" Conlon interrupted me. "We all feel like this some time or other. But it's nothing. Tell him it's nothing, Chris."

"It's a pity that The Reader can't hear him," said Carter with an amused smile.

"Perhaps you'll tell him then?"

The smile died slowly on his lips. "If you wish," he said. "But I'll tell *you* something about The Reader. He's an old man, and we think of him as the finest newspaperman in the country. I've heard you call him that. But he's not interested in journalism. He's had but one idea, to build up his newspapers to be vehicles for his political message. That's the pill and we put the jam on it. The jam is made up of Mather stories. When the public swallow them, as they want to, they take The Reader's pill along with it. But you, you aren't complaining about the pill, you're saying the jam has pips in it. Now let's go home, for God's sake."

My ill-humour had gone, and I smiled ruefully. "You're a fine, sympathetic, understanding pair . . ."

Carter shrugged his shoulders. "Did you expect us to do or say anything but what we have? If Sean and I agreed with you we'd be morally bound to resign too. There's nothing wrong in being afraid to make lonely decisions." His voice became bitter. "This isn't the age for it. Men are no longer able to make up their own minds, and when they try to, Society stops them. We live in a world of groups and armies. There's no

cowardice in shirking a decision when the group you belong to doesn't agree with it."

"To hell with you both," I said. "Neither of you know how I feel. I'm like a man who has suddenly opened his eyes and found that he is standing on the edge of a cliff. I have vertigo."

"Your problem isn't a newspaperman's problem," said Carter. "When you're in doubt you must make a decision. Right or wrong, you must make it or you're lost."

Conlon raised his tankard to drain it, covering his rough, bewildered face. Then he replaced the tankard on the bar and stared at us both. "I know why he's resigning. It's not because he hates journalism, it's because he loves it. If he hated journalism, like you do, Chris, this wouldn't bother him at all."

Carter smiled at him affectionately. "Now listen to the Celtic seer, the voice of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. Sean, why is it that you can philosophise only when you're drunk?"

We left the Club then, as if there were no problem, or as if they had settled it for me. We went down the panelled staircase slowly, and at the bottom Sean broke away from us and postured drunkenly. He began to shout.

"Over here in England I'm helpin' wi' the hay
And I wisht I was in Ireland the livelong day. . . ."

"Take his arm, John," said Carter calmly. "He'll be singing *The Wearing of the Green* next."

We led him into Fleet Street, and we were surprised to find how late the night had become. The narrow canyon of light, slipping down to Ludgate Circus, was alive with printing-house hands. On the corners, out-

side the little cafés they were already lounging, or squatting on their heels in the lamplight.

"First edition's away," said Conlon happily, and the thought of it touched me suddenly. My spirits warmed to the faint thrumming in the air, to the sight of the printers in their blue overalls, the ink on their bare arms. I looked up to the lights behind the high windows of Reuter's building, the flowers in the window-boxes staining the night. I saw the gentle spire of St. Bride's pricking the sky, and I knew that Conlon was right, I loved Fleet Street.

Conlon stood on the kerb unsteadily and he began to sing, roaring the words at the pavement on the other side.

"She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps,
And lovers around her are sighing . . ."

Carter frowned distastefully, and from somewhere his raised hand brought a taxi. We pushed Sean inside it after he had insisted on shaking each of us by the hand. As the taxi drew away he leant out of the window and shouted back to us:

"OH! make her a grave where the sunbeams rest,
When they promise a glorious morrow. . . ."

"I like Sean," said Carter at last when Sean's happy voice was lost beyond Temple Bar. We looked at each other and smiled. "I'll take a bus from here," he went on. "Don't worry about it, John. Only saints or prisoners could ever afford the luxury of a conscience. It's a small thing that worries you. Let it go and it will get smaller and smaller until it disappears. That's how it is with most problems. Do you want my advice?"

"Haven't I been getting it all evening?" I asked him. "But there's your bus."

"Let it go. . . . There are evils in this profession, John. Hell, where aren't there? If you want to correct them why not take the real chance you've been offered, with The Reader. He's not a fool. He's not even an unreasonable man. Providing you give it honestly he even listens to advice."

"Does he take it?"

He laughed. "No. I'm talking nonsense. When he asks for advice he is merely using men as sounding-boards. But I think I've stopped him from making mistakes other men might have encouraged." The light of the street-lamps gave his face a harsh colour as he turned to me. "Supposing *you* hadn't covered the Mather Story. Supposing it had been Robertson, or Llewellyn, and they had told you exactly what had happened. Would you still resign?"

"Perhaps." But I knew this was not so. Even Vaughan had laughed when I told him that Mather had cried. I knew that had I been told of it I might have laughed too.

"You wouldn't. *Your* vanity has been injured. The man cried in front of *you*. The woman called *you* a swine. So it becomes your problem, and you want to strike back, and you strike at the paper. But you don't hurt it, you will hurt yourself. For what? What do you want, do you want me to resign? And Sean too? Do you want to revolt in the Street, do you want us to march behind banners?"

Put that way it was ridiculous and childish, and he angered me again. "You're not trying to convince me, Chris, but yourself. You want a cynical argument to justify the fact that you have sold yourself to The Reader."

“Perhaps,” he said, and dropped his cigarette in the gutter. “You’re a free man, do as you wish. I’ll take this bus now. Good-night, John.”

★ ★ ★

I did not alight from the bus in Kensington but let it carry me on to Fulham, and there I walked down to the bridge and to the house where I had first met Mather’s model. It had been easy enough while in the bus to make a decision to call on her and tell her that the story was not to be published, but when I at last stood there in the dark street, looking upward to the light glowing behind her studio window, I was unable to approach the door. The woman had struck deeper at my vanity and my pride than perhaps I had realised, and I had no wish to face her contempt again. So I stood there like an adolescent boy, while the wind whipped up the rain again and the coughing trains quarrelled along the sidings.

When the light behind the window was extinguished I went home.

F I F T E E N

BY the light that came from beneath my mother's door I knew that she was awake. In the drawing-room I went to the window and threw back the curtains. The yellow glow from the lamps in the square softened the darkness of the room and I looked down to the gardens where black laurel bushes crouched in conspiracy with the earth. The plane trees were sprinkled with fresh leaf that turned, twisted, and shuddered against the light. Behind me the clock *tickered* busily.

The noise of the telephone startled me, and almost before I put the receiver to my ear I heard my sister's voice, angry and resentful. "Johnny, is that you? What on earth's happened to Mother?"

I sighed. "I've just come in, I haven't seen her yet. What is it all about?"

"It's really no good. She's impossible. I can't have her down here, and I don't know why I let you and Malcolm talk me into it. You can put up with her yourself, although if you're sensible you'll put her in a nursing home. If she weren't my own mother I'd say she ought to be certified."

My hand holding the telephone began to tremble. I could not answer her, and I took the receiver from my ear and looked at it hopelessly. In the hall I heard the faint creak of my mother's door, her footsteps gently whispering to the floor outside. She was listening again.

I shrugged my shoulders and put the receiver to my

ear. "Tell me about it, Mary, but for God's sake try to be a bit considerate."

"It's impossible to be considerate with people who seem to have the devil inside them. She telephoned me to-day, Johnny. I don't know if you put her up to it, but I'm just tired of it all and I can't start all over again. You don't know what we went through with her during the war."

"Tell me what happened."

"She insisted that she moved all of her dreadful furniture down here and said that you'd told her it would be all right. She made an awful fuss. She said I was to keep the children quiet because the noise they make would kill her. She said that now you're getting married and didn't want her any more I would have to take responsibility for her. What did she mean, Johnny, are you getting married?"

"No, I'm not getting married," I shouted, and I heard my mother's feet scurrying back to her room. "Be patient with her, Mary."

"I'm being patient, I'm boiling. She's not ill, she's as healthy as a mule, she's just a cantankerous old woman who likes to make everybody miserable. You're a fool if you won't see that she's pretending half the time. May God forgive me for saying this about my own mother, but she is a wicked-minded old woman."

"She's your responsibility now."

"She is not. I'm not having her. She had no right to speak the way she did. She insisted that we move out of our bedroom because it's the one that gets the morning sun, and she likes the morning sun. It reminds her of those damned Highlands or something. She said she'd have breakfast in bed, which is all right, but she wants the children kept quiet. We're to do this and we're to do that, all as if she were drawing up terms for our

unconditional surrender . . .” Her voice ran on, impatiently, angrily. “She said her children had hurt her enough by marrying beneath them. What on earth have you been doing, Johnny? Have you picked up a little piece?”

“I’ll talk to her, Mary, she’ll do what you want.”

“All I want is never to see her again. No, not that, but I’m not having her down here.”

I spoke from a great emptiness and loneliness, as if I were a small boy again. “What do I do then?”

“What do I care what you do? You’ve no wife and no family, you put up with her until she dies. I’m sorry, darling, I know I sound cruel, but I must think of Malcolm and the children first.”

“Why do parsons marry women like you?” I asked bitterly.

“Look what Father married. Poor Daddy, Mother drove him into an early grave, and she’s not going to do it with Malcolm. Good-night, Johnny, try to understand.”

I put down the telephone and drove one fist into the palm of my hand. For a few seconds I stood there in the dark room where the street light sought out the crouching chairs, and the clock snickered its derision. I heard the creaking of my mother’s bed, and in the kitchen Bran whined self-pityingly.

At last, when I could trust my tongue, I went in to my mother. I opened the door on to the darkness of her room; she had switched off the light and I knew she was only pretending to sleep. The light from the hall fell across her bed in a broad triangle, and I saw that she was lying with her head to one side in the hollow of her arm. I was startled by the age I saw in her face, the shadows sinking into the hollow of her cheek and thickening the lines on her forehead. When I could no

longer look at this I went to the bedside and switched on the lamp. She opened her eyes slowly, without blinking, and when I said nothing she smiled at me slyly, a childish, guilty smile. Then she raised a hand and patted her hair.

I did not know what to say to her, and I left her side and went to the window. In the silence I listened to her short, self-conscious breathing, her lips whispering encouraging words. The heaviness of all things in that room oppressed me, the great bed that still looked empty although my mother lay in it, that great bed that had sired so many Appin Stewarts if her dreaming was to be believed. The gigantic mahogany dressing-table dripped gilded handles, its glass surface littered with an archipelago of lace mats and empty bottles. The wardrobe door hung open on a broken lock which she refused to have repaired because it held some memory of the lost years. I remembered that lock far back into my boyhood, it had always been broken. I remembered that as well as I remembered the musty smell that came from inside the wardrobe, the smell of lavender, of aged clothes. On a corner-stand, by the cold gas-fire, was a bowl of stately irises which I had bought her three days before. Instead of radiating their icy beauty they seemed to contract. They were the only living things in this room. I told myself dispassionately that my mother was already dead.

I turned to her at last. She had been watching me anxiously, and when I faced her again that foolish, kittenish smile prinked her lips with its insipidity. In my loneliness I longed to do what I have never done, to kneel beside her and let her comfort me. Even as a boy I had been unable to come to her in moments of unhappiness. For years I had believed that this was because I had somehow lacked the will or humility, but

now I knew that my mother could comfort no one. Her sympathies and compassion were turned inward and wasted on herself. Yet she was my mother and she demanded my loyalty.

She must have sensed what I was now thinking for she put up her hand and, involuntarily, I took it. It linked us together again and I knew that I was lost. She gripped my fingers and surprised me by the passionate strength of her grasp, drawing me down to the bed. I knew that she would never leave me, just as she knew, perhaps, that no one would tolerate her as I did. But my anger, my sense of defeat needed outlet, and I spoke to her with more regret than reproach. "Mother, that was a wicked thing to do."

She pretended not to understand me. She frowned and her white lips opened, and I knew that she was going to cry, not from grief or sorrow, or even from self-pity, but because crying would be an interval of time during which she could gather strength to resist me.

"You mustn't cry, Mother. You know what I mean. You knew that if you upset Mary she would not want you down at Guildford. You did that deliberately. Why did you do it?"

"*Oh, Johnny, Johnny!*" She cried like a small child, making no effort to control the tears as they slipped down her cheeks and dropped on the faded shawl.

"You can't avoid answering by crying, Mother. Why did you do that?"

"Nobody understands me like you do, Johnny," she said, and she stroked my cheek. "My favourite child, my *only* child."

"Mother . . . *why did you do it?*"

Miraculously, her tears ended. There was bright excitement in her face and she pulled her body higher

on the pillow, patting the sheets with one hand and pulling me closer with the other. She smiled at me cunningly. "They both tried to separate us, didn't they? Your sister and that girl who wants to marry you."

I did not try to deny the existence of this girl who so alarmed her. I dragged my hand from her fingers and stood up. "Mother, have you ever thought of anybody but yourself? Do you realise what you're doing to my life? Why?"

She shrank into her pillow, away from my anger, and looked at me with an expression of frightened sanity, raising one hand as if she expected me to strike her, but when I turned away from her, exasperated, her voice became wheedling. "I thought you really didn't want me to go, Johnny. I thought Mary had persuaded you against your will." She knew this was a lie, of course. She must have known it was a lie. "I did it for you, Johnny. You need a mother. You're the only one who cares for me. I'm so unhappy without you." Truth and deception were so intermingled in what she was saying that it was almost impossible to answer her.

Yet I did not understand the strength of my anger when I turned to speak to her. I thought of what I had said to Vaughan, how casually I had said that concern for my mother no longer need influence any decisions I had to make.

"I'm chained to you, Mother," I told her harshly. "Every day you make that chain tighter. I can't move, I can't breathe. I have no home but this frightening collection of furniture which you keep to remind me of a boyhood I never enjoyed. As a boy you never understood me, and now I am a man you try to suffocate me by treating me as if I were a child. I was a fool ever to take you from Mary when I came out of the Army. Without you I could be free, free to do what I like.

Now, just when I should be free you tie me closer to you!"

They were the most bitter words I had ever spoken to her, and I intended them to hurt her. I had frightened her and now there was no pretence in the tears that filled her eyes. Her thin body shook with great sobs and her hands trembled, the knuckles knotted and the thin flesh blue.

I dropped on my knees beside the bed and gently held her hand to my cheek. "Mother, why couldn't you see that it would have been best for us both for you to go to Mary? . . ." At this her body shook again, and I pulled my handkerchief from my pocket and began to dry her cheeks, crooning to her meaninglessly until her tears stopped and she lay with her eyes closed. I got up from my knees then and sat beside her.

She opened her eyes at last and at first her expression was shrewdly intelligent, but I watched it die and be replaced by that childlike, faery distraction. Her lips moved excitedly.

"We'll go home, we'll both go home, Johnny laddie. We'll go home to the Highland house, you and I." Her eyes flickered toward the door as if she expected an interruption. "It's so dreadful here and we shan't be parted if we go."

I saw that it was hopeless. I rose from the bed and tried to speak calmly. "Mother, there is no Highland house. It was sold when Father died, years ago. You know it was sold, don't you? Don't you remember, or don't you want to remember? We came to London: You worked as a mistress in that private school for a while, and then you became a cashier in the hotel until your health gave out again. Remember those things, Mother. They are true, the rest is what you dream."

She pouted her lips at me and laughed. "Don't be so

silly, John. As if I would have taken work like that; my family would never have approved."

I sighed. "Very well, Mother, just as you say. Go to sleep now, you're very tired." I bent down and kissed her forehead, but she sensed the lack of warmth in my lips. She caught my face in her hands desperately, and she whispered to me unintelligibly. Slowly but firmly I released myself.

She straightened the creased sheet and said with disarming indifference. "What did you mean about needing to be free now?"

I answered unthinkingly. "Just that I'm resigning my job, for reasons that may make it difficult to get another like it."

She may have been surprised, but her faded eyes stared back at mine without emotion. I thought that she would be pleased, that she would congratulate me on leaving something she hated, but she said, "Have they accepted your resignation?" And when I shook my head, "Then of course you won't resign. We need the money, don't we, dear? Now you be a good boy and tell them you made a mistake."

She pulled at the sheets and eased her head comfortably on the pillow. There was an expression of serene confidence on her face as the muscles gently relaxed. "I'm so happy you refused Mary's offer to take me. It's best when we're alone, and I like to see you last thing at night. Good-night, Johnny, my son, my bonny laddie."

I left the bedroom without answering her, and I stood in the hall wondering why I felt nothing, no anger, no desperation, no despair. Behind the door of the kitchen Bran heard me and whined pathetically. I let him out into the hall, and he rolled over my feet with his tail thumping the floorboards.

SIXTEEN

DURHAM SQUARE, that Saturday morning, awaited me in a livery of green and grey. The air was crisp with fresh sunlight, and as I looked up to the pale leaf dusting the tops of the trees I discovered to my surprise that I was content. I recalled Carter's words that it did not matter whether a decision was right or wrong, the making of it was alone important.

Nothing had changed since the day before but the weather and my feelings, and I admired the wonderful alchemy of sleep that can transmute care into indifference. Above me an awning of white cloud in a serenely complacent sky, below my feet the pavements still wet from the night's rain. I swung my raincoat over my shoulder and whistled.

I had left the flat without seeing my mother. For a moment I had paused at her door with my fingers on the handle, and then the hopelessness of speaking to her again had overwhelmed me, and I left. I did not catch a bus but walked to Kensington Gore and along the edge of the Park. Below the trees the nodding trumpets of the daffodils sounded a silent reveille, and the sun glistened on the flanks of the horses in the Row. It was not a day for high principles, I thought. To breathe was a pleasure, to have sight, voice and vision seemed satisfying enough.

Vaughan had been right after all, and Carter too. A night and a bright morning had combined to make my high-toned declamations of yesterday seem faintly

ridiculous. The darkness of Mather's anger was erased by the green of the gardens and the heat of the early sun. The swirl of traffic beneath the quadriga at Hyde Park Corner had not been halted by my scruples, and the world had ignored me and my emotions as it had always done. Nobody cared whether I resigned or not. I was almost past caring myself.

As I padded along Constitution Hill the Mather Story began to appear more and more of a triviality. No damage had been done to the man, nor yet might have been had the story been published. I was able to smile at myself for being disturbed by the neurotic hysteria of this Kentish recluse. I was suddenly caught up by the newspaperman's occasional contempt for the public. *Parturiunt montes*, Carter had said, and I believed that my doubts had indeed been delivered of a mouse.

Yet I had not reached the point of deciding to withdraw my resignation. Why, I do not know, but I do know that the doubts that had perplexed me had somehow been neutralised. Whether I resigned or not now seemed no more important a problem than the morning choice of a necktie.

And my mother . . . I had no doubt now that she would be my responsibility until the day she died. Something linked us. Yet—I wondered why I had not thought of this before—I was now to earn thirty guineas a week if I stayed with the *Standard*, I was to move within The Reader's rewarding orbit.

The problem seemed too easy. I do not attempt to explain my change of mood and feeling. Had the morning been rain-drenched and thunderous I might have felt the same. Perhaps I had in truth burnt myself out the day before, the fire being at last extinguished by those minutes in my mother's bedroom. Whatever it

was I shrugged my shoulders, the spasm of conscience seemed to have passed.

Within their wind-guarded crescent before Buckingham Palace ranks of tulips were motionless in the sun. Crowds were already gathering there, drifting across the grey flagstones in coloured waves to watch the assembling guard. I stood to watch them, filling my pipe, a little smug, a little complacent, as relieved as any average man would be who believes that he has survived an emotional climax without any apparent effort. And then I went away down the Mall, toward the smudge of Admiralty Arch and the shorthand outlines which the pigeons were pencilling against the sky.

Unconsciously I had walked nearly three miles. Forty minutes after I had left Durham Square I passed through the Arch. In Trafalgar Square a swathe of pigeons swept down the column and dusted the stones with the excited flurry of their wings. Already the sun was hot, and the clouds had slipped from an enamelled sky. The bells of St. Martin's broke the shuddering bubble of their carillon above my head as I climbed to Duncannon Street. I lifted my eyes in approval to the sweet-tongued spire.



Saturday ended the brief gestation period of the *Sunday Standard's* weekly issue. The day began a little indolently, and it ended two hours after midnight when a few of the staff kept the dog-watch, counting the slow movement of the minutes and listening to the spasmodic stutter of the teleprinters, or playing poker behind a barricade of coffee-cups. The late hours before the last edition are jaded, but they can hold moments of unexpected suspense. The tired and resentful deputies who remain in authority are aware that the world can

disintegrate as abruptly at three in the morning as it can at three in the afternoon.

Between morning and morning we fed the lascivious hunger of the presses, attended the accouchement of each demanding edition, spoke sharply to Paris, Vienna, Rome, and New York. We were ruthless in our demands, we would drag the vicar of an Ipswich village from his bed or harry a reluctant politician on the steps of the boat-train. We drank wormwood with our tea. We burnt ourselves out with our cigarettes. We produced a newspaper.

Because journalists are no more skilful than most men what we did in the time was miraculous. Because we are as ignorant, as human, and as venal as most men the *Sunday Standard* was not the word of God, although on Sunday mornings it had a wider and more attentive audience.

At eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning the staff of the paper descended two floors to the News Room, a vast, low-ceilinged plateau, compact with noise and vibration. We sat at heavy wooden desks, placed end to end in radiating spokes from a central hub. The telephones snaked wires to the ceiling, and against the windows of the far wall, below the livid light of the ventilation well, a rank of teleprinters regurgitated spools of paper from their glass mouths. Little groups of men and women, sightseers, who came to watch a newspaper at work could only be confused by what they saw, by the noise, by the apparent lack of organisation, by the fact that while some of us idly drank tea and gossiped, others burrowed like rodents through mounting hills of paper.

At the hub of the radiating spokes sat Vaughan, Eccles, Davies, the Chief Sub-editor, the copy-taster, the Manchester sub, and, on a small chair behind

Vaughan, an equally small boy who was ready to take copy, to bring tea, to buy cigarettes, to find sandwiches after the canteen closed. Whatever his menial task he was always called "sir" by Vaughan because "you never know in this place when the office boy is going to become an editor."

There was one seat reserved for Cooper at the hub, the "back bench". He came to it, mincing and belching delicately, at four on a Saturday afternoon, his cigar-case and his copies of *Life* and *Time*, the *Spectator*, *Tribune* and *New Statesman* under his arm. On Saturdays we forgot our dislike of him in our admiration for his skill and efficiency. He came to expose faults, to add commas to the briefest of paragraphs, to read the leader, to dispute with the political correspondent, to irritate and insult Vaughan with his cold and dispassionate amiability. Cooper's supreme characteristic at this moment was his initiative. He never faltered, his decisions came upon the heels of a problem and he never withdrew them. The decisions were wrong as often as they were right, but the fact that he made them without faltering moved us all forward on a great wave of confidence.

He sat in his chair, mountainous, his white hands grasping galley-proofs, the cigar jutting straight forward from his parted lips, rhythmically spurting blue balls of smoke across the papers. He read every word that the *Sunday Standard* printed and much that it did not. His blunt, axiomatic comments were scribbled across the proofs that were laid before him. If he added a comma or a colon, however ungrammatically, it remained to the last edition, it was an "editor's must", a sacred tablet of the Lord. As he sat there on the back bench, omnipotent, pride and satisfaction shone on the flesh of his cheeks.

His influence was tremendous and had a cobra-like fascination. Yet when he went back to his high office at seven in the evening, back to the soft shadows of his crimson curtains, back to the view of the gentle river, back to wait by the telephone that connected him with The Reader, then there was general relief on the News Room floor. It was as if a tense cable had snapped. Voices rose, there was laughter, and our shoulders relaxed.

He returned at half-past eight when the first editions of the other Sunday papers were brought in. By then the News Room had survived its first violent paroxysm. The Bell, the Cock, the Coggers, the Mucky Duck, Feathers and Auntie's, the Poppins, the Cheese, or the Press Club had claimed some of us. At half-past eight Cooper came to stand erect behind Vaughan's chair, his bloodless fingers jabbing critically at the pages of our first edition, and, as he jabbed, Vaughan's scissors snapped angrily at the paper and his voice called, "*Boy! Boy!*"

Cooper stayed for half an hour, during which he invariably remoulded the paper, and then he would depart to his lonely dinner at the Dorchester. Sometimes he returned at eleven, more often his voice came cracking down the telephone to the Assistant Editor's patient ear. But all the time Cooper knew what his newspaper was doing and saying, and because he knew, so did The Reader.

When I walked down Whitefriars' Street and saw the glint of the river below, saw a reconnaissance party of sparrows swirling from the Temple gardens, I hoped that I would not be forced to spend the whole day within the Cloisters. It would be pleasant to have an outside assignment, to telephone a story late in the afternoon and not be expected to return. I thought how pleasant

a country village would be to-day, and then inevitably I thought of Mather's village. . . .

Vaughan was alone in the News Room, plucking his moustache and thumbing impatiently through a ragged sheaf of agency messages. He looked up and grinned at me pleasantly, but there was a touch of uncertainty in his voice. "Hello, John. I'd like you around to-day." He must have seen the disappointment in my face. "Unless," he added, "you'd like to cover a peace meeting over in Central Hall?"

"Whose peace, East or West?"

"Iron Curtain peace. I don't want to give the Commies space, but they have a decoy curate and scientist as speakers. It might make an amusing paragraph or two. How do you feel?"

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled. I sat on the corner of his desk and watched the sunlight falling in geometrical patterns across the end of the room. A single teleprinter coughed, hammered a staccato line and then was silent. A copy-boy's strident whistling rang metallically against the overhead pipes. "Where's everybody else?" I asked.

"They're out . . . I didn't know how you'd feel. I was going to put you on the cricket match between the Eton College boys and some Bermondsey dockers, but . . . " He looked at me uncertainly again.

"But you don't trust me?"

"It's not that . . ."

Eccles came across from the door, his hands clutching a bush of papers and pencils, his frown irritable, his cigarette dripping ash to his waistcoat. He sat in the Assistant Editor's chair next to Vaughan and looked at the paste-pot unhappily.

"Conference with Walter in half an hour," he said. His temper was never under control on Saturday, its

ragged edges showed at the corners of his lips, the tight flesh of his eyelids. He pulled a bottle of dyspepsia tablets from his pocket and put it on the desk before him. He saw me smiling at it and he snapped, "You got a job, Ramsay?"

"I've got one for him." Vaughan swung his chair so that he was facing me, with his back to Eccles. He looked up at me and slowly rubbed his finger up and down his cheek. Then he stood up, on impulse, took my arm and led me across the room where we leant against the filing cabinets. He pushed his tongue against his cheek. "O.K., John? I mean about yesterday."

"You gave me until Tuesday, Jack."

"I know, I know," he brushed his hand through the air impatiently. "But you've had time to think . . ."

"Why don't you want me to resign? Do you find it a challenge?"

"Oh, Christ, I'm not worried. I've only got one attitude. This is a job, it fills my belly." He patted his waistband and I looked down.

"It does that, all right."

He grinned. "Well . . . that's all we ought to worry about. Now how about the peace meeting?"

"Give it to one of the Saturday men. I'll stay on the desk. What's news?"

"We've got a splash coming from Johnson in Korea, and there's some good stuff on sabotage of that Dakota that crashed. But we could do with a meaty page lead, something like . . ."

"The Mather Story?"

"Yes," he said, "why not? Those damned interfering lawyers!"

I was tempted to tell him that it had not been the lawyers but The Reader, but I had not the will. I went back to the desk. It was pleasant enough to work that

morning. The desk where I sat was covered by the swinging perimeter of the sun's dusty light, and there was a rhythm and urgency in the work that always pleased me. Now and then Vaughan would look across to me, his frown still uncertain, and once I thought of going to him and telling him that there was no need for concern, but the paper had us all in its tightening grip, and we were losing individual personality; we danced like marionettes to the persistent music of the day's news.

Agency messages, reporters' stories, seared newspaper clippings from the library made a pale garden of paper on my desk. My work was simple, a telephone call of confirmation for this story, the rewriting of another, it was not work for a reporter but for a sub-editor, and I knew that Vaughan was keeping me there only because he could not trust himself.

Slowly through the morning the paper gathered impetus, the teleprinters began their challenging chatter and did not stop, telephone bells and typewriters were counterpoint to a peculiar and persistent humming that filled the building. The humming made by News. News of the lonely individualist sailing the Atlantic in a battered boat, the Italian mother of seventeen expecting her eighteenth, the American negro lynched on a hot Georgian night ("It's far away, keep the story down to three pars, John, it's only parish pump stuff"). News of the baronet's daughter eloping with a farm-labourer, the casualty list from the latest war, the Gaiety girl dying among her souvenirs ("Get the cuttings on her, John, look for everything. Champagne out of slippers, lovers, that sort of thing"). News of the baby with a safety-pin in its oesophagus, the watch committee's offensive on beach-side indecency ("There are pictures of the girls coming, John, so rewrite it as a caption").

The news of the day passed into our capable hands and then into brevier and minion, into column measure, galley-proof, and page-proof. On the floor above, the presses moulded the steaming matrices. Three floors below, the press-hands walked about their great engine-room of steel. I enjoyed it all, touched only once by alarm when I realised how close I had come to abandoning this.

As a valediction to my callow conscience I picked up the telephone and asked for Mather's number. I wanted to tell him that the story would not be used. There was a long pause, and then finally, "I'm sorry, caller, there is no answer."

There seemed no more to be said; whatever virus had afflicted me, I thought, has passed. And then, after lunch, the neatness and certainty of it all was disintegrated. I returned from the Bell at half-past two, pleasantly contented by cheese and bread, by mild-and-bitter and lazy shop talk. I was pulling my typewriter toward me when Vaughan's copy-boy came to my elbow. He laid an agency message on my desk. "Mr. Vaughan said would you handle this obit, and see him when he comes back."

I lit myself a cigarette before I picked up the message, clipping it under the strap of my typewriter. When I first read the purple capitals it was without understanding.

PAC X BROWN I-MATHER

FAMOUS ARTIST DEAD

1.20 PM LIONEL MATHER, OM, RA, FOUND DEAD
THIS MORNING AT HIS HOME IN KENT. DISCOVERY
OF THE BODY WAS MADE BY MARION MARGHERITA
LUCAS, AGED 39, FRIEND OF MATHER AND HIS
MODEL. WHEN SHE CAME TO WORK THIS MORNING

AT 11.30 SHE FOUND MATHER LYING ON HIS BED AND WAS UNABLE TO AWAKEN HIM. WHEN DOCTOR WAS CALLED ARTIST WAS FOUND TO BE DEAD. UNCONFIRMED VIEW THAT DEATH DUE TO OVERDOSE OF SLEEPING TABLETS WHICH MATHER WAS TAKING UNDER DOCTOR'S ORDERS. EMPTY BOTTLE BY BEDSIDE.

MORE FOLLOWS. PA OBITUARY YOU HOLD.

I was still reading it, holding it in my hand and staring at each word, when the boy came to my desk again, laid another message there and went away whistling.

PAC X BROWN 2-MATHER

LUCAS SAID 'MR. MATHER HAD NO WORRIES THAT I KNOW OF BUT HE HAS BEEN VERY TIRED AND HAS BEEN WORKING HARD LATELY. HE COMPLAINED OF HEADACHES'.

PAC X BROWN 3-MATHER

LIONEL MATHER, ONE OF BRITAIN'S GREATEST ARTISTS, MAY BE BURIED IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY. SIR GILES GORDON, MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY, SAID TO-DAY (SAT) 'LIONEL MATHER WAS THE MOST BRILLIANT AND ADVENTUROUS ARTIST THIS COUNTRY HAS SEEN SINCE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. HIS STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION WENT UNREWARDED FOR MANY YEARS. WE ARE GREATLY IN HIS DEBT. IN MY OPINION THE LEAST THIS COUNTRY CAN DO IN RETURN IS TO SEE TO IT THAT HE IS BURIED IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY OR SAINT PAUL'S. I SHALL MOST CERTAINLY LEND WHAT WEIGHT I CAN TO SUCH A PROPOSAL'.

This message too I placed on my desk. My movements were automatic, I had not yet begun to think. I called the copy-boy from his desk where he was eating an apple and reading an American comic.

"Get me the cuttings on Lionel Mather from the library. Ask them if they have an obit already prepared. There should be a Press Association obit somewhere in the files." I was surprised by the evenness of my voice.

When he came back he passed by the teleprinters, ripping a pink sheet from the glass and placing it by my machine.

PAC X BROWN 4-MATHER

VILLAGE MOURNS ARTIST

SINCE THIS MORNING VILLAGERS OF CRICKLEHURST, KENT, HAVE BEEN CLIMBING THE LITTLE HILL TO THE TITHE-BARN WHICH WAS LIONEL MATHER'S HOME. THEY HAVE LEFT TRIBUTES OF WILD FLOWERS AT THE DOOR. A SHORT SERVICE WAS HELD IN THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL'S THIS MORNING.

THE VICAR, THE REV. ARTHUR HENRY CHARLTON, DSO, SAID 'I HELD THE SERVICE FOR MATHER, OUR FRIEND, NOT MATHER THE ARTIST. THE ARTIST BELONGS TO THE NATION BUT WE SHALL MOURN A FRIEND WHO PLACED US GREATLY IN HIS DEBT'.

★ ★ ★

All afternoon the story unfolded itself from the teleprinters, threaded among the greater and lesser news, and it was brought to my desk. Before me on my desk I had two buff envelopes in which were all that the British Press had ever printed about Lionel Mather. They began thirty years before with a short court report of a summons brought against three young art students

for some horse-play at the foot of the Albert Memorial after the Chelsea Arts Ball. Mather was one of them (he was described as *Leslie* Mather) and he had been fined forty shillings. The magistrate said that after seeing some examples of the young man's work he was forced to the conclusion that Mather would be better employed in some useful occupation. In the stilted manner of the day the story was headed "Art Student Censured".

From such humble and frivolous beginnings the newspaper clippings grew in volume, but among them was no interview with the man, only references to his exhibitions, his paintings, his sales. There was an *Observer* profile written in diluted acid, and toward the end, a week or so before his death, a veiled, amused reference to the slapping incident.

As I gathered this into a thin and unsatisfactory story I did not look across to Vaughan, and I discovered him standing by my elbow before I was aware that he had left his chair. One hand was thrust into the waistband of his trousers, the other was plucking his moustache.

"How's it going, John? Don't take too long. I've sent Llewellyn down to Kent to see if there's any colour he can pick up. We'll give it the right-hand column on page one. Do you want any help?"

I had lost my nerve. Perhaps if Vaughan had not come I would have fought out my emotions alone, but I said savagely, "I've got the best story. Why bother about Llewellyn? How do you want it written? Yesterday the *Sunday Standard* killed Lionel Mather?"

The flesh below his troubled eyes was an unhealthy white. He picked up the first sheet of my story and read it. "That's O.K.," he said, "but don't worry about an intro, Llewellyn will get that."

"You heard what I said?"

"I heard you, John. What have you got that says it's suicide?"

The thickening noise of the News Room blanketed my thoughts. I heard Eccles' petulant voice calling across to the telephonists. "Brussels, take Brussels from four one four!" Above his head hung a gently oscillating sign. It said, *Check your facts. To-morrow is too late.*

I licked my lips and thrust a cigarette between them with a jerking, angry movement. "Are you going to pretend it wasn't? You haven't sent Llewellyn down there for colour, I could have given you that from my own experience there, and you know it. You've sent him to dig out whether it was suicide or not."

"So what?" he said shortly. "We couldn't print it if we proved it. Not until after an inquest." He took one of my cigarettes from the desk and lit it casually. "Anybody can take too many sleeping tablets. Particularly if they're tired."

He leant his buttocks on my desk and put the other hand in his waistband again. Other men on the reporters' desks were staring at us curiously. "All right," he said, "we might try 'Mystery of Lionel Mather's Death'."

I ignored his sarcasm. "What mystery, for God's sake? He killed himself because he thought we were going to run the other story."

Vaughan did not reply, he studied the end of his cigarette reflectively. To me the room seemed suddenly to have filled with men, their faces turned toward me in the swirling smoke. Boys were wandering idly with chipped enamel jugs of tea in their hands. A breeze fluttered the coloured-edition map of England behind Eccles' shoulder. There was a burst of excitement from the sports' desk and somebody shouted, "Newcastle

are up!" I knew nobody was watching us. Vaughan and I were alone with my conscience, which had made an unwelcome and unexpected reappearance.

I turned my eyes from the hat-stands and the coat-racks, my ears from the shouts of "*Boy!*" and the itter-yammer of the tape-machines.

I looked at Vaughan. "Well?"

He joked, smiling at me with more appealing kindness than amusement. "Death's a mystery, I'm told. All right!" He pulled his body from the desk and swung his body on his keel. "There's no mystery if you like. Cooper and I went down there early this morning and beat the silly little man to death with the leader column." He was very angry, but whether it was with me or with the unreasonability of life itself I could not determine. "But the man's dead and we're producing a newspaper. Are you going to carry on with the story? There's more coming through. What is it, are you annoyed because I sent Llewellyn down and not you?"

"I suppose the woman would have called me worse than swine. Murderer, perhaps."

It was melodramatic and Vaughan lost patience with me. It showed in the whiteness of his face and the tightening of the loose skin on his forehead. His copy-boy, an urchin with a freckled face, came to his elbow and looked at me with a grin.

"Berlin on the line, sir. You wanted them."

Vaughan was so angry that he forgot his customary politeness to the child. "All right, kid, hop along." He turned to me. "I'm through wet-nursing you, Ramsay. Throw your temperament at Cooper's head. You're a hell of a newspaperman. . . ."

I thrust the carriage of my typewriter to a fresh line and stared at the paper. I brought my voice under

control. "I'm sorry, Jack, I'm not trying to duck the story. But why pretend? You know Mather must have killed himself because he thought we were going to run the dirty-picture story." I slowly tapped a line of full-stops along the sheet of copy-paper and then tore it from the machine. I kneaded it slowly between my sweating palms.

Vaughan eased his fat neck nervously inside its collar. "I don't know that. You told Mather we weren't running it . . ."

"I phoned. There was no reply."

I thought of the great studio that morning, the sunlight falling on the bowl of wallflowers, the black beams pointing their derisive downward thumbs, the cat playing silently with its litter. The telephone ringing and Mather asleep, in deep, deep sleep.

"Pity," said Vaughan, and I saw that he was upset. "But it was probably an accident. A man wouldn't kill himself for *that*. These things happen."

"Then why make a mystery of it?"

Vaughan shrugged his shoulders. "I was kidding, but what's the story worth without an interesting mystery? A third of a column obit. It's a story everyone will have. Do you think the public care about a straightforward death? It happens to most of us." His expression softened. "Would you like to leave it? I'll put someone else on it."

"No. You'd better go and talk to Berlin." I smiled as best I could. "And call your boy sir next time."

He put his hand on my shoulder and then walked back to his desk. When he sat himself there he looked across at me and raised his hand encouragingly.

At four o'clock Eccles pushed his tired body across to my desk. His thin, sebaceous hair had slipped forward over his forehead and was matted above his frowning

eyes. Bad temper and impatience had that morning set the contours of his face, ribbed and valleyed, beaded with sweat. Nervous agitation jerked a muscle at the corner of his right eye.

"You're doing the Mather obit, Ramsay? Will you take Llewellyn, he's putting his story over to the telephonists? I'll give you a top copy in a minute. We don't want much on it." He wiped his hand across his cheek and rubbed the moisture from it to the sleeve of his shirt. "Llewellyn got something about the house and a woman. Play up the woman if it's interesting, there's a picture coming. And for God's sake don't be long on it." He went back to his desk, his back arched, his comical legs bent with exhaustion.

Llewellyn's voice was far away at the end of an unsatisfactory line, a calm voice, unhurried, the voice of a reporter away from his office. "You aren't very popular down here, Johnny *bach*."

"I know that, Dai, what have you sent?"

"Nothing much, a bit of sex. There's a buxom woman down here been asking the boys if they know you; that is, when she wasn't trying to get us out of the house. There's a bumpkin of a local policeman who's never seen a Metropolitan Police card before, and doesn't drink. Have you a copy of my story?"

Eccles' copy-boy slipped it before me as Llewellyn spoke. "I've got it," I said. "What's all this about the flowers from the villagers?"

"Flam mostly, Johnny. Some of the boys put 'em up to it. But it makes a good angle and it caught on. All the kids in the parish are wandering up there, picking buttercups and daisies." I heard the clinking of glasses in the background and shouting. "There's a hell of a noise in this pub, is it the only one round here?"

"It is."

"Well, it'll do. The woman found the body this morning. The vicar says half the tablets were taken, someone else says all. Use your discretion, Johnny. He said Mather looked peaceful, and who wouldn't? I said. The vicar says Mather must have been tired, very tired to make such a mistake. I've got some quotes from toothless old villagers if you want them. They're all queuing outside the pub now waiting for the boys to buy them drinks. Want any more, Johnny?"

"No mystery?" I asked. "We're making it a mystery death here."

"*Dioul!*" said Llewellyn. "If you want me, ring the pub, will you?"

★ ★ ★

We carried the Mather Story in all editions. The right-hand column of page one, blocked at the bottom by a six-inch advertisement, was too short, and the story filled the whole of the centre column instead, below a two-column picture of the flowers lying at Mather's door. The italic caption to this picture read "*For in that sleep what dreams may come . . . ?*"

We made a mystery of Mather's death, yet discreetly, without use of the word itself. The sub-editors who ruthlessly mauled my earlier obituary were faithful to Eccles' instruction that they should "tell it as a short story".

When the first editions came up and a boy laid a copy of the paper on my desk I read the story without emotion. It was well told. The story of an old recluse living happily among the Kentish orchards, a man whom the world honoured, a man who turned his back on the world and lived in dignity and simplicity, painting fine dreams on great stretches of canvas. Such a man, of course, bore no relation to Mather at all, but that

seemed irrelevant. The man we created and killed in that story had died still at work on "The Assumption", and Marion Margherita Lucas (I still could not accustom myself to the use of her name) arrived that morning to model for him and had found him asleep on his bed. Asleep, but dead. And "*in that sleep what dreams might come?*"

The use of the quotation had not been a flash of sub-editorial lyricism. Llewellyn said that it had been written on a card pinned to one of those posies of flowers. Nobody believed Llewellyn, of course, because the cameraman, hastily despatched to photograph the inscription, could not find it.

An asterisk carried the reader's eye to the foot of the story where he was modestly informed that the phrase rightly originated with a greater master of English than the *Sunday Standard* could afford to employ.

The story was all there, the villagers with their flowers, the vicar and his service, Sir Giles Gordon and his advocacy of an Abbey burial. From the centre of the column there stared the blurred, sullen features of the man whom I was convinced I had killed.

That picture would probably be removed in later editions and replaced by one of Marion Lucas. The engravers were already working on the block.

I wondered why the story carried its sense of mystery, until I saw that the overturned, empty bottle of sleeping tablets had been mentioned three times.

I read the story twice, and then I slowly folded the newspaper clippings, put them back into Mather's folder and returned it to the library. There an assistant took up a red pencil and wrote *DEAD* on the flap of the folder.

It was eight o'clock. The noise in the News Room was now subdued, and the Cloisters slowly throbbed with

the turning of the presses below. Beyond the windows on the far side the thin evening air was a fragile blue. I was tired, and there was a dull, persistent ache in every muscle of my body, as if I had been exerting them to resist the new obligations which Mather's death had placed on me. Throughout the early afternoon I had been able to avoid the thought of what this meant, but now that my mind was liberated from its work on the Mather obituary I discovered that it was unable to record any sensation or thought.

Within the little box of a newspaper office the world outside seems no more real than that which one sees on the stage of a theatre. The contempt we have for the human beings whose activities we record is not unkind, but springs from familiarity and boredom. Tragedy and bereavement figure more largely in our work than joy and happiness, and if we do not share the grief we record in others it is because a man is capable of only so much compassion; beyond that point he is bored.

So Mather, to the men about me that Saturday evening, was another puppet who had danced a short while for us. This impression was infectious. It may have been why I felt nothing.

Rejected sheets of copy-paper were scattered over my desk. Tea had been spilled and lay in a congealing pool behind my typewriter. All along the reporters' desk there was the same confusion of paper, tea, books, and snaking telephone wires. Most of the reporters had gone to enjoy a brief break between editions by sitting on the stools of Fleet Street's bars, talking shop. I wanted to join them and yet I wished to avoid them.

Slowly I gathered up the papers on which I had made so many false starts on the Mather obituary. I tore them into small fragments and dropped them in the basket.

Without knowing why, I took the original agency message, folded it neatly, and placed it between the leaves of my diary. Then I lit a cigarette, leant my head against my hand and stared about the room.

With one edition already flapping its anxious way from the presses the News Room looked as if it had been hurriedly evacuated. The first shift of the Saturday staff had gone home, and the night shift were grouped about the far end of the reporters' bench, smoking and talking softly. At the centre of the radiating desks Vaughan sat alone, eating his supper from an aluminium tray, drinking thirsty gulps from a chipped mug, and marking a copy of the first edition with his pencil. When he had made a mark, he tore that portion from the page, shouted, and thrust it into the hands of the first boy to reach him. He worked automatically and efficiently.

As I watched him I endeavoured to focus my mind on Lionel Mather by telling myself clearly and simply that I was responsible for his death. It was more alarming to realise that this self-accusation had no effect on me, it was too melodramatic, too unreal, yet I knew it to be true. I was inside the Cloisters, and outside nothing was real. Here were men working in their shirt-sleeves, telephones were ringing desultory alarms, a canteen worker in a dirty apron was collecting empty cups. You could not look at an urchin-faced copy-boy, sitting there reading an American comic, and seriously believe that you were responsible for a man's death.

"John!" Vaughan was beckoning me with his fork.

I ground out my cigarette and walked across to him, sitting in a chair beside him (it was Cooper's chair, and accordingly very comfortable), stretching out my legs and looking at Vaughan guardedly. The round cheeks moved up and down rhythmically as he munched. The small frown that cut his brows above the bridge of his

glasses was a permanent, unconscious feature that meant nothing. Sweat glittered on the dark hair at his temples.

He put down his fork and his pencil and turned his face to me, his tongue working quickly about his teeth. He said nothing, but he looked at me whimsically and I knew that he was wondering what he should do and say. I realised that to him I must have looked surly and miserable as I sat there across the room, cigarette in my mouth, head held in my hand.

He picked up his mug and sucked the hot tea into his mouth. He grimaced. "No sugar," he said. "Those bitches down there never put any sugar in the tea. How are things?"

"I feel nothing. That's the hell of it. I know what I should be feeling, and yet I can feel nothing."

"You know your trouble, John? You worry too much."

The atmosphere in the News Room seemed to justify his lazy irony, but I challenged it theatrically.

"I never killed a man before. Once during the war I saw a German, the only one I ever saw, the only one, that is, who had a right under the Geneva Convention to kill me in fair fight. He was a long way off, coming out of a farm-house in Holland. He was there and I fired. He disappeared. Maybe he was bending down to tie his bootlace or pick up a cigarette-end. Maybe I killed him. It never felt like this."

The story seemed silly, a histrionic and hysterical gesture. Yet it was true.

Vaughan thrust his fork into the fish on his plate and began to maul it savagely. "Damn canteen meals!" he said. "You've killed nobody, for Christ's sake!"

"We know Mather committed suicide. Wait until the inquest."

"Inquest, hell!" Vaughan swung in his chair, he seemed genuinely puzzled. "If he died from those tablets it'll be an accident, you see. A neurotic little devil makes a mistake with a medicine bottle and you have to worry about it."

"I'm not worrying. I'm tired."

"Well, go home. You're off duty anyway." He laid a hand on my knee. "Go on home, there's nothing more to do." He looked at me and I knew he was about to ask me about my resignation. I forestalled him hastily.

"I'll stay. It's safer here. If I go home I'll . . ." I stopped. "I suppose it was an accident."

"Of course." He pushed his tongue against his cheek. "Of course it was an accident. There ought to be a law about sleeping tablets." He smiled. "Maybe Mather found them in a doctor's car and thought they were sweets. Go and get a drink. I'll be in the Club about nine if you'd like a swift game of snooker." I nodded, and then he said it, "About that resignation, Johnny . . .?"

But I left him, without answering.

SEVENTEEN

THE long, saloon-bar of the Cogers was empty but for one man in the corner, a tall, frayed man drinking morosely and staring at his unsympathetic reflection in the mirror. He watched my reflection, too, as I entered, following me with his eyes, and I knew that I had only to return his glance long enough for him to speak to me, and tell me about his troubles which were naturally far greater than mine. Perhaps he beat his wife, or had been taken in adultery, or had lost his job, or had cancer, or just did not like living, and he wanted someone to be as sorry for him as he was for himself.

I ignored him. An Alsatian sat among the dining-tables with its tongue quivering below the sharp interrogation of its ears. The polished bottles glittered in the sharp light. I ordered a drink and waited for Sean.

When Conlon came he eased himself on to the stool beside me and said nothing. I had seen him during the day, working on the subs' desk across the News Room, and occasionally he had raised an eyebrow toward me. But now he was silent, and I did not encourage him to talk.

At last he said, "The poor man, then." He said it as if he were speaking to himself, softly, and at first I thought he was jeering at me. Then I realised he meant Mather.

I did not reply. I lifted my glass and gently swirled the beer at the bottom.

"The poor man," he said again.

"Let us pray!" I answered him with quick anger, and he looked up at me and smiled. "Do you think it was an accident, Sean?"

He sucked in his cheek and bit it reflectively. "Those sort of things happen. Ach! Of course it was an accident, John. The poor man."

"Damn the poor man!" I pressed the palm of my hand down on the counter. "Why the hell did he have to kill himself? Couldn't he wait until he saw the paper to-morrow? Why didn't he answer the phone when I rang him?" I said this although I knew that I had been telephoning a man already dead.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I said.

"He didn't kill himself, John."

"You know that's not true. You know, Sean, and so does Vaughan."

He rubbed his hands together slowly. "I wouldn't worry about it."

But I was not listening to him. "It's curious. I was ready enough to resign because of the original story, and probably would have done." I chose to forget my tranquil indifference that morning. "Now Mather's dead, and what frightens me most is that I shall do nothing. If only one of you would say I was right I'd resign now."

"Do you want my advice?" Sean looked at me coldly over his glass, "or do you want my shoulder to cry on?"

I was surprised by the tone of his voice. I realised that to him I must appear as that man at the far end of the bar appeared to me—self-pitying, contemptible.

"Just your friendly advice," I said, a little stiffly.

"You won't resign, Johnny," said Sean without sympathy but more kindly now. "You've talked too much about it. If you were going to resign you would

never have written that obit this afternoon. By the way," he looked up at me with an ironic smile, "I subbed it, did you know? It was all my work."

"*You* did!"

"Yes. Good story, wasn't it?" He was challenging me to lose my temper with him, and I wondered why. "You know you should have taken your hat and walked out of the Cloisters then, out of Fleet Street too. You didn't do that because you knew that would be taking on too much. One man can't do penance for all the sin in this game, any more than he should take all the credit for the good in it. There is good in it," he added challengingly.

"Tell me about it."

"Ach, to hell with you! You're a big baby."

"You know what I'm feeling, Sean. Don't bully me."

"If you'd had the guts to walk out, John, I might have walked out with you. I'm that kind of fool." He rested his hand on my arm. "It's a melodrama you're playing, John."

I was unconvinced. "I let it pass, then?"

"Why not?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps it was suicide. If it was, it was a damn stupid thing to do, and you aren't going to take responsibility for Mather's twisted mentality, are you? You should learn something from this. When you take a newspaperman's job you do the stories the way the paper likes them, and you leave it at that. Newspapers aren't tolerant, compassionate things. They are the products of popular taste and the creators of popular taste, may God help us."

"May God help us, indeed. But your argument's wrong, Sean. We aren't the product of popular taste, we are the corrupters of it."

"Fine words," he said with a grin, and flicked his

fingers at the attentive Alsatian. It came over to him and laid its muzzle gently on his thigh. He stroked it gently. He had a soft, affectionate nature that tuned his emotions to the feelings of others, and I wondered what it had been that had come between him and his wife. I wondered what it was that had come between him and me now.

He turned his eyes from the dog to me. He was smiling faintly. "Do you decide the policy of the paper? People buy us, they like us. We entertain our readers, but they don't respect us. We aren't the *Manchester Guardian* or old *Granny Times*. We are the *Sunday Standard*, the greatest entertainment you can buy on Sunday morning. And if you think the public wants anything more from a Sunday paper you've been asleep for a long time."

"Then nobody's to blame."

"Nobody's to blame," said Conlon. "Mather was an innocent bystander."

"There's a flaw in your argument somewhere, Sean."

"Oh, to be sure." He grinned at me. "Remember my cartridge-cases?"

"I like you better when you're drunk."

"I like myself better when I'm drunk. Who wouldn't? Now, you aren't going to resign, are you?"

"I'd feel better."

"No," said Conlon. "*Jesus Mary!* People don't act on conscience just to feel better; well, only cynics do, perhaps. You'll stay."

"So, I'll stay, *Kathleen ni Houlihan!* Tell me why?"

"You'll stay because you don't think the responsibility is all yours. You think Mather should take his share, and Lovett, and Vaughan, and Cooper. Carter and me, and our four million depraved readers. You're not going to take all the blame, so you'll stay."

We said nothing more for some minutes. We sat at the bar, staring at the yellow woodwork and the glinting metal, the palette of coloured bottles. Behind us the Alsatian softly and tirelessly padded the floor. The misanthrope at the end of the bar cleared his throat noisily, put down his glass and left.

"I know what's wrong with you, and with Chris and Vaughan," I said at last. "If I threw it up you'd all be forced to examine your own consciences." He smiled at me and softly flicked his finger-nail against the rim of his glass. "Your indifference and your cynicism are all a pose and a defence."

"You've a damned unpleasant tongue in you sometimes, Ramsay. You won't honour a friend's advice."

"I suppose it was honour that brought you from that rag in Belfast? I suppose it was honour that makes you rake the gutters for *The Reader*?"

"I didn't come over for the pleasure of your company." He said this with a pathetic dignity that wounded me. He got down from his stool slowly and picked up his dirty raincoat. His cigarettes fell out of the pocket and when he had bent down and picked them up his face was red. "Good-night. Cry in your own beer."

I watched him go, wanting to call him back, but an illogical and unreasoning anger restrained me. I ordered another glass, drank it quickly and then went out myself, almost hoping that he would be there, waiting, and grinning sheepishly. But Salisbury Square was empty, a serrated edge of shadow crossing it diagonally.

I walked into Fleet•Street and then up the dark channel of Ludgate Hill. St. Paul's wore a thin belt of street-lamps about its dark waist, and beyond it, in the desert of empty cellars and weed-choked rubble, a rising wind teased the dust.

Once I had left the shadow of the cathedral I found

the moon washing the pale city, the spires of Wren's churches cream in the light. I counted my footsteps as I walked alone and a City cat followed me for two hundred yards in patient curiosity until I turned to stare at it, remembering the Siamese in Lovett's garden, the kittens rolling on the floor of Mather's kitchen. I called to this night marauder, but it whipped the air suspiciously with its tail and leaped into the shadow.

I walked on. I had not wished to offend Conlon, but talking with him had not helped. For a while I tried to remember Mather's face in the belief that this would solve everything, but I could see only his broken fingernails, the rabbit's blood dripping a scarlet star on the brick floor. I remembered the velvet bowl of flowers in the studio, the mist about the copse, all things that were tranquil and impersonal.

I could remember the subtle presence of the woman by the window, her tormenting figure. But not her face now. Not her face and not Mather's face. This was not just a quixotic trick of my memory, it was, perhaps, that I did not wish to remember the emotions I had seen in their eyes.

Mather was dead. I felt a great pity and a great contempt for the tortured stupidity of the man. What had made the poor, naïve fool take a newspaper so seriously?

Had Mather killed himself? It was an easy matter for a tired and unhappy man to fumble in the dark and take his life unknowingly. Llewellyn had said that Mather left no letter, that he had gone to bed the night before satisfied with the work he had done that day. How had Llewellyn known that? Llewellyn had not known it, he had invented it. Or perhaps the vicar had told him, the vicar with black beard jutting. For that matter, how had the vicar known? How could anybody know what Mather felt or thought that last night?

And if nobody could know, then nobody could know with certainty that it was not an accident. If nobody knew, then I did not know.

I went through this argument with tortured concentration, like a child with tongue in cheek pondering an arithmetical problem. It seemed important for I was as yet without a decision.

Then I realised that whatever decision I made would be made alone. To be alone is to have part of oneself die, and what had Carter said? *We live in a world of groups, and we can live comfortably only by conforming.* That was typical of Carter's reasoning, yet it was true.

If I abandoned that romantic and hysterical gesture of resignation there would be no one to blame me. All who knew of it would approve what they considered my good sense and intelligence.

Yet the feeling of guilt remained with me still, I was not walking it out of my system. I was in Cheapside, its macabre emptiness, the moon-daubed stump of Bow Church and beyond it a labyrinth of silent streets. I walked on, counting my footsteps again. One hundred and twenty paces to the minute. In an hour at that rate I could walk four miles, if walking was all there was to it.

The wind was rising, catching a mournful aria from the empty throats of the buildings between Cheapside and Eastcheap.

What good could it do Mather now, what good could it do me? There is always something comic in an act of principle. Such demonstrations are made by zealots who can see the problems of the world in terms of black and white.

There was my mother. It was easy to think I owed more to her than to Mather because I wished to believe it. She was my responsibility now and would be until she died. What I did, where I worked must be

influenced by the fact that I had to support her. I considered this dispassionately, as a reason for abandoning my act of principle if ever I were challenged on it.

Whatever my decision I was going to make it alone. All over the world there are groups clamouring for the loyalty of the individual and extinguishing him once he gives it. We do evil and we do good not as individuals but as groups, and we are reeds bent by the water. Where we bear responsibility we bear it as a group and not alone. We are subject to the subtle prejudices of good and evil and we must take our share of each. To be wholly good is as much an abnormality as to be wholly bad.

To resign from Fleet Street would be the act of a simpleton. I came to that decision as I stood alone below the colonnade of the Mansion House. If there was still a nagging doubt in my mind I endeavoured to smother it.

It was Vaughan who put another thought into my mind. He was leaning against the billiard-table later that evening, chalking his cue, his face smooth and unruffled in the green, reflected light of the cloth. "That woman," he said, "what's her name? Lucas. Is that the one you met?" He bent over the table, grunting a little as he pressed his belly against the edge. He made his shot and then stood up. "From her picture she seemed a hard piece."

I did not answer him. I was thinking, she should know the answer.

E I G H T E E N

MANY people had come to the funeral of Lionel Mather. The infinite charity of death is that it can momentarily silence criticism, and there were people in the churchyard who had once derided or envied Mather and were soon, no doubt, to deride or envy him again after a decent interval. When the funeral was over they hurried away, anxious to get back to life. The wind passed up the side of the tower and turned the pale underleaf of the ivy to the sun. When I left Lovett I returned to stand against the wall, watching the branches of the elms shivering uneasily.

I knew and yet I did not know why I was waiting. I wished to see the woman Marion (using her name somehow took away the elusiveness of her character). But she had left the churchyard since that moment when I had last seen her, standing arrogantly by the verger.

The wind trembled the mound of spring flowers on Mather's grave, a shuddering, lonely ripple among the petals. The wind was beginning to sing now, moving quickly across Kent from the Romney marshes and the Channel beyond. I heard the great branches cracking their knuckles. Slowly the lych-gate swung on its hinges, creaked, rapped on the wood, swung open to creak and rap again. The churchyard was empty, and, by the gate where the reporters had stood, the torn fragments of the hymn-sheets were whirled in a frantic circle and dispersed across the grass.

Still I waited. In the three days that had passed since

I walked alone in the City it seemed that I had been waiting. I had pushed decision from me and I knew that the further I pushed it the less passion I had left to feel shame or disgust. The problem was receding from me. So why was I there? It had been easy for me, no one had challenged me on my responsibility for Mather's death, no one had blamed me but myself, and it is difficult for a man to be both prosecutor and defendant.

Perhaps that was why I stood there still, waiting for the challenge. I had been fighting nobody but myself; Carter, Sean and Vaughan had all refused the challenge. And then I admitted to myself that this was why I was waiting for the woman.

There seemed little more to it than that, and in this churchyard, high and quiet on the weald, it would have been easy to forget. White and pink chalk blossoms on the orchards below marked their own passage of time. They followed a logical, reassuring cycle, an inevitability I desired.

In the eight centuries of this church's history many men had died roughly and brutally within the sound of its bells. If the vicar was to be believed, the peasants, innocently rising to overthrow guile and falseness, had made their stand, been vanquished and buried with less ceremony and respect than I could expect. Their gesture was remembered only by an iron stanchion, an obliterated scratching on a stone wall, by a sentimental parson who would cheerfully have watched them hanged, drawn and quartered had he lived in their time.

The vestry door opened and the verger came slowly down the path. He was no longer wearing his cassock. A tight blue serge suit was wrapped about his body, and it clothed him with an impossible gravity. He carried his bowler in one hand.

He was surprised to see me but he smiled pleasantly.

"One of the reporters, aren't you? Did you hear the vicar?"

"No," I said, looking at his broad, serene face.

"He said very little, which was most proper I thought. I believe he wept a little, they were such friends you know. Some of the ladies in the congregation cried too, they were holding handkerchiefs to their eyes when the vicar spoke. It was most moving." The worn elbow of his jacket shone as he held his hair against the wind. "It's going to rain," he said regretfully. "We've had such a wet spring, although the sun this week brought out the blossoms much earlier. But bad weather doesn't do me much good. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

"Why?" I asked, although I was not interested.

"The war, you know," he said. "I was in the bag in Germany."

I looked at him with mild surprise. He seemed too old to have been part of the war that my generation now regards as its own. "Were you a prisoner for long?"

"Five years," he said. "They took away one lung and left me most of the other." He put on his bowler hat, and now that it hid his grey hair his face became younger. "Those Jerry doctors were very good. Saved my life, I suppose." He spoke of it in a disinterested fashion, as though we were discussing another person. "This sort of job would be good for me, even if I didn't like it."

His contentment in face of such an overpowering disability disarmed me, and I could say nothing.

"Well . . ." he said, and rubbed his hands together briskly. "These things go on just the same, don't they?"

"Do you know if there's anyone at Mr. Mather's house now?"

He looked at me curiously. "I don't know. I believe

that Miss Lucas, she found him that tragic morning . . . she's there, I think."

"Thank you . . ." I put five shillings in his hand.

He looked at it and his face became red. "No, sir, I don't want this . . ."

"I'd like you to have it. You've been a great help to the Press, and we've made a mess of your churchyard."

I left him abruptly, and behind me the lych-gate rapped against the wood and then creaked back in the wind. I heard the noise again as the verger passed through, and then the sound of his boots on the road as he followed me down the hill. I hurried on. I did not want him to catch me up and walk with me; my conscience would not support that. My conscience, I decided, had been a nuisance over the past few days.

By the inn the shooting-brake that had brought the newsreel camera, and also two cars that had brought reporters, were parked beneath the chestnut trees. I could hear voices in the bar, the thud of a dart striking the board, laughter. For a moment I thought of joining the men in there, seeking the comfort of this unimpassioned, uninhibited freemasonry of which I was a member. I paused at the inn door, enjoying the warm smell of beer and metal polish, and then, involuntarily almost, I turned away and walked through the village to the tithe-barn.

The little lane, walled by high whitethorn, was still hot from the sun, and the fresh leaf on the high pennant branches quivered sensually. The copse of trees that protected the tithe-barn was a great orchestra in the wind, but the brick-walled garden was silent. I walked slowly across the flagstones and at the door of the studio I paused before I knocked.

There was a strange uneasiness in my mind as I struggled to find words that would adequately explain

why I had come, but at last I knocked, and heard the woman's footsteps on the floor inside.

She opened the door as if she had been expecting me, there was no expression of surprise on her face. She still wore the yellow scarf that had been about her throat in the churchyard. She said nothing. There was no grief in her face, and although I knew that she had not cried at the church because so many others were struggling with suitable sorrow, I wondered why, now she was alone, she still could not weep. Perhaps all the tears she had to shed had fallen when she found Mather's body. Then I knew that she was a woman who could never cry. Her grief would be a dry desert within her.

She stepped back from the door and let me enter.

The stove in the studio was empty, its apron door hanging open. The bowl that had once held wallflowers was empty too, and a single white kitten sat on the table beside it, watching me with startled blue eyes. Mather's brushes had been taken from the jar, cleaned and laid in neat rows beside his palette. The smell of turpentine was stronger, I noticed, and I looked at the woman's hands, seeing the stains there. Mather's canvases, his cartoons, all were neatly piled by the legs of the piano. There was an air of finality about them.

The woman left me and went to the table, bent her face close to the kitten and pursed her lips affectionately. It closed its eyes and rubbed its head against her cheek. Then she picked a cup from the table and looked at me questioningly as she drank.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," I said foolishly.

"You haven't."

"I wanted to say how sorry I was to hear . . ."

She put down the cup and looked at it, and then with her forefinger she carefully wiped a trace of lipstick from its rim. She turned on her heel and thrust her hands

down into the pockets of her skirt, and the action tensed the muscles of her shoulders and her breasts.

"That's kind of you."

She spoke without emotion, yet there was that vibrant quality in her voice that so unsettled me. She drew in her breath and turned again, withdrawing her hands from her pockets to smooth her skirt over her hips. Every action, even uncalculated, seemed to be designed to demonstrate the powerful, animal grace of her body. In that simple turn, for example, hips, shoulders, thighs, they moved challengingly.

Her back was toward me. It was obvious that she wished me to go, but I dropped my raincoat over the back of a chair and stood there obstinately.

"I believed I should come . . . on my own part, that is, not my paper's."

"Yes?" She spoke with her back still toward me. She did not try to help me, although I believed that she must know why I was there.

"It was a tragic accident," I said, realising that I had made it sound like a question.

"Yes," she said again, and faced me now. I saw that the corners of her mouth were tight, and her eyelids were heavy. But she held her head upright and looked arrogantly into my face.

"Was that all, Mr. Ramsay?"

"Yes," I said, "That was all."

She walked across to the door and put her hand on the latch. "Thank you for calling. Your sympathy is much appreciated." She did not attempt to disguise the irony in her voice.

I pretended that I did not know that she wished me to go, and I walked across to the window and looked out to the garden. The rain had begun. Dark, olive-green stains were appearing on the young leaves, and in the

elms the rooks began to abuse one another violently. The studio quickly grew dark and cold, and when I turned again from the window I could see only the faint white colour of her face in the darkness. To want her sympathy and her understanding was, I knew, to wish for the impossible. Yet I felt myself longing for it like a child.

"Will you go now, Mr. Ramsay, please?"

Her yellow scarf was bright against the black wood. For the first time there was pain in her voice. I was close enough to her now to see her features, the parted lips and the eyes unexpectedly bright.

"There's something I must say," I said, "I must ask something. About Mr. Mather's death. I feel that perhaps I may be responsible in some way."

"*You?*" There was only curiosity in her tone. I might have suggested that I believed the postman responsible. She leant back against the wall and she said, quite calmly, "You think he committed suicide?"

I lost my head then. I shook my head. I said, "That was an unpleasant assignment I was given last week. I had no idea it would upset him so much . . ."

"It was an accident," she said coldly, but she took her hand from the latch of the door and gripped it with the other to stop their trembling. "That was explained at the inquest."

"I read that," I said, "but naturally . . ."

"But naturally," she broke in with crude sarcasm, "you thought it was suicide and we had hushed it up?"

I knew what she was thinking. "I told you," I said, "I'm not here as a reporter. I'm not trying to get a story."

"Aren't you?"

I wanted her to admit that it was suicide, to blame me, deride me, spill out her hatred of me and my paper.

I wanted her to do these things so that she might approve of the renunciation I would then make. But she looked at me with a smile of contempt.

She moved away from the door to the empty stove, closing the apron with the toe of her shoe. She took a cigarette from her pocket and tapped it on her thumb-nail. All of her movements were clean and precise.

"So you came down in the hope that I would tell you it was an accident." She lit the cigarette, sucking in the smoke and speaking quickly as she exhaled it. "Well, Mr. Ramsay, you may go away happily. It was an accident. The coroner decided that it was an accident." She went on bitterly and hurriedly. "Perhaps you read it. He said it was easy for an old man living alone, wrapped up in his work, to make a mistake like that. It could happen to anyone. There's no reason for you to feel upset." She looked at me steadily and I knew she was lying, and that moreover she wanted me to see that she was lying.

"I wish you would go now," she said, her voice suddenly tired. "You've never been welcome here."

"You make it difficult . . ." I began, but she turned on me savagely, her mouth open and her hands swinging up to her cheeks.

"*Will you go!*" It was as though she had struck me.

I left her, and as I stepped into the garden the soft compassion of the rain touched my face. I walked down the lane without hate or admiration for her, nor yet the grudging desire which her body had once provoked in me. The few minutes in that house had burnt it from me.

I walked quickly while the wind shook the white-thorn.

★ ★ ★

At the door of the Cloisters I bought an evening paper,

and in the lift I read of Mather's funeral. There was a photograph of Marion Lucas striding up the path of the churchyard, a discreet description of her as *Mrs. Marion Lucas*, model for Mather's unfinished *Assumption*. I wondered who Mr. Lucas had been.

The story itself was a straightforward report of the ceremony, a recollection of Mather's standing, and that was all. Below it was a follow-up to Sir Giles Gordon's Abbey proposal. It seemed that if the good people of this world were to have their way Mather would soon be disinterred and reburied where the feet of curious tourists could walk across his tomb.

The editorial floor was damp and humid, the drenching rain might have been sucked through its walls. The windows were curtained by condensation and the lights glowered in watered bars along the ceiling. Vaughan was leaning on his folded arms against the top of Davies' desk. He was laughing. The top button of his trousers was loosened and there was something humanly and coarsely likeable in his appearance. He stands between me and my own stupidity, I thought. When he saw me he flicked a cigarette into the corner of his mouth and lit it.

"Where've you been?" When I told him he looked at me curiously. "You might have told me you were going. There's been a hell of a flap for you." He stepped away from the desk and took my arm. "You didn't tell me," he said softly. "I didn't ask you, but we can't leave it in the air indefinitely. . . ."

"It's all right," I said. "Nothing to worry about now."

He patted my shoulder. He went on patting it long after it was necessary. He was happy, and I was curiously grateful for the friendship this happiness indicated. "Good boy," he said, "good boy. You gave

me a bad turn, you know? Don't do anything like that again. Now go and see Walter, he wants you."

The heavy sky lay against the windows of Cooper's room, and the glass was wrinkled and twisted by the rain. The green desk-lamp dropped a cone of light over Cooper's white hands. He peered at me and a thin smile sprang obediently to his lips. "Ramsay," he said, "sit down, laddie."

There was a flash of lightning across London and in it his face appeared momentarily livid and diseased. Then the room darkened and the sullen thunder rattled the window.

"A wretched day," he said conversationally. "Have you been out, Ramsay? You were wanted."

"I've been to Mather's funeral."

He raised one eyebrow and looked at me without further change of expression. "There was nothing in that for us, surely?"

"No, sir."

His cheeks puffed out and his chest shook. He patted his belly chidingly, picked a slip of paper from his desk and waved it gently. "I have his lordship's note about your salary."

There was another flash of light, held in microcosm on the curving water-carafe by Cooper's hand. The thunder began almost before the flash died, and the windows beat angrily against the jamb.

"It's overhead," he said. "I hope it changes, I want some golf this week-end. You play golf, laddie?"

"Indifferently, sir."

"We must have a game some time." He stared at me in silence, and I thought his eyes seemed unhappy and tired. "His lordship wants to see you this evening; you'd better phone him when you leave here. He wants you to 'do an article.'" He paused, waiting to see if I had

any comment to make. I had none. "I don't suppose there's any advice you'd want from me, but come to me if you do want help. Remember, a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end."

I looked at him as though this thought had never occurred to me. He stood up at last. "All right, laddie. Get on to that phone call."

When I returned to my desk I sat for some time looking out of the window to the river and the wet city beyond. I was glad that the reporters' room was empty, and yet I did not feel alone.

At last I picked up the telephone.

"This is John Ramsay," I said to the operator. "Will you please put me through to his lordship?"

